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CHRISTMAS TIDINGS

BY  
WILLIAM MUIR AULD

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CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS  
THE MOUNT OF VISION  
CHRISTMAS TIDINGS





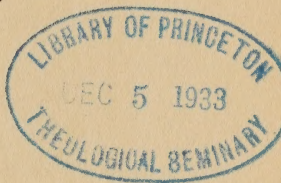


*Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace.*



# Christmas Tidings

By WILLIAM MUIR AULD



God rest you merry gentlemen,  
Let nothing you dismay,  
For Jesus Christ our Saviour  
Was born on Christmas Day.  
*O tidings of comfort and joy!*  
*Traditional English Carol.*

NEW YORK  
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY  
1933

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TO  
WILLIAM





## PREFACE

*Christmas Tidings* is intended as a companion volume to *Christmas Traditions*. Much that appears in the one is taken for granted in the other. The present work deals with the faith of which Christmas is the festival; less, however, as a body of abstract doctrine than as a matter of objective veneration and as the outward sign of a possible inward grace in the hiddenness. Its chapters are largely descriptive and seldom wander far away from the atmosphere of poetry, which is, perhaps, the only one proper to the Nativity Season. This poetry is found, not only in legend and verse, but also in the great historic liturgies like the Roman *Breviary* and *Missal*; and to each some reference has been made, as well as to more modern forms of literature, and all in the interests of illustrating and elucidating the spiritual significance of the Word made flesh. The liturgies mentioned are introduced here and there purely as religious literature—as among the classical expressions of the Christian spiritual consciousness—with no knowledge whatever, other

than imaginative, of their use in acts of corporate worship. They are regarded as the common heritage of all who profess and call themselves Christians and even of those who do not. I trust that enough has been said to hint the manner of approach to Christmas through them.

It is hoped that *Christmas Tidings* will be found as unsectarian in spirit as its predecessor. If by sharing these simple thoughts and feelings concerning the most beautiful of all festivals and the most wonderful of all faiths, any should come to delight in both, that would justify the appearance of these very imperfect papers.

To two works, whose pages are seldom closed, I seem to be most of all indebted: *The Testament of Beauty*, by Robert Bridges, and *Immanence and Christian Thought*, by Frederic Platt.

The principal references will be found recorded at the end of the book.

For permission to make certain extracts from the following works, I extend to the copyright owners my deep and hearty thanks: *The Testament of Beauty*, second edition, 1930, by Robert Bridges, Poet Laureate (The Clarendon Press, Oxford, England); *The Roman Breviary* (a new edition, 1908), by John, Marquess of Bute, K.T. (his Lordship, the present Marquess of Bute and the publishers, William

Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh and London); *The Roman Missal*, arranged for the use of the laity (Burns Oates & Washbourne, London, England); *Selected Poems* of Francis Thompson (Wilfrid Meynell and the publishers, Burns Oates and Washbourne & Jonathan Cape, 1908); *The Book of the Holy Graal*, a Mystical Poem, by Arthur Edward Waite (John M. Watkins, London, England, 1921); *Complete Poetical Works of Browning* (1895), *Wordsworth* (1904), *Byron* (1905), Cambridge Edition (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass.); *The Idea of the Holy*, by Rudolf Otto, translated by John W. Harvey, fifth impression, 1928 (Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, London, England); *Man and the Supernatural* (1928), by Evelyn Underhill (the authoress and E. P. Dutton and Company, New York); *The Philosophy of Mysticism*, by Edward Ingram Watkin (Grant Richards, Ltd., London, England, 1920); *Poems of Blake*, chosen and edited by Laurence Binyon (Macmillan and Company, London, 1931).

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W. M. A.

April 25th, 1933.



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THE STRONG SON OF GOD

*Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove;*

*Thou seemest human and divine,  
The highest, holiest manhood, thou:  
Our wills are ours, we know not how;  
Our wills are ours, to make them thine.*

TENNYSON, *In Memoriam*, Prol.

*A frosty Christmas Eve when the stars were shining  
Fared I forth alone where westwards falls the hill . . .  
Then sped my thoughts to keep that first Christmas of all  
When the Shepherds watching by their folds ere the dawn  
Heard music in the fields and marveling could not tell  
Whether it were angels or the bright stars singing.*

ROBERT BRIDGES, *Noel: Christmas Eve*; 1913.



## CHAPTER I

### THE STRONG SON OF GOD

#### I

THERE are four Gospels which portray the life and ministry of Jesus, but only two, the first and third, present the stories of His birth and infancy, or what are sometimes called the Joyful Mysteries of the Incarnation, in contradistinction to the Sorrowful which center in the Cross and Passion, and the Glorious that pertain to the Resurrection and Ascension. In the New Testament, and in historic ritual and devotion, a mystery is never anything concealed or hidden, but always something which has been revealed. "Great is the mystery of godliness," writes St. Paul, "God was manifest in the flesh." <sup>1</sup>

St. Mark's Gospel, the first to be written, contains no reference whatever to the childhood and youth of Jesus. It ushers Him on the scene full-grown and sketches in bold and vivid outline His active career from Baptism to the Resurrection; personal

<sup>1</sup> I *Timothy* iii, 16.

knowledge of which, it may be remembered,<sup>2</sup> was deemed an essential qualification for the apostolic office, and so presumably the Memoir represents the substance of primitive missionary preaching in the Roman world. This Evangelist reckons "the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God" to have had its *beginning* by the river Jordan, when, at the hands of John the Baptist, the Carpenter from Nazareth received both call and consecration. But to that Gospel he assigns no *ending*; for his story hastens on to Calvary, and to the open sepulchre, where the reader is left in the presence of the risen Lord and Saviour, who for believers filled all the sphere of God:

The fountain light of all their day,  
The master light of all their seeing.

The Fourth Gospel, the last to be compiled, is also without Nativity scenes. Nor has it any concern with mere human genealogies, as have St. Matthew and St. Luke. Jesus is, indeed, the Son of Abraham and of Adam, as all Hebrews were, and in His own right a scion of the House of David; but with an amazing thrust of thought both He and the Gospel of grace and truth are rooted for origin by St. John in the loving heart of the Father of an infinite majesty. The Prophet of Galilee, who had

<sup>2</sup> *Acts* i, 21 f.

been seen and heard, who had trodden the highways and byways of Palestine, who had thirsted, wept, suffered and died, was—stupendous thought! in the beginning with God, *was* God.

St. Mark in his narrative aims only to limn one half of the cycle of the Christian revelation—as it curves upward from the soil of Judæa to the great White Throne in Heaven. St. John looks behind as well as before; for he that ascended is the same also that descended. Thus in the terse and pregnant Prologue to his Gospel, he swoops down, with the swift majestic movement of the eagle, from the transcendent heights of the Eternal into the time-series and declares that the age-long creative activity of God found its culmination in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth. His *logos* language, though somewhat foreign to present-day modes of thought, need present little difficulty. The Divine Creator and Lord of all gave, and continually gives, of Himself in the vast powers and processes of Nature:

God of the Granite and the Rose!  
Soul of the Sparrow and the Bee!  
The mighty tide of Being flows  
Through countless channels, Lord, from Thee!

Nor did He ever leave Himself without a witness in the human soul; since, to employ some striking lines

from *The Testament of Beauty*, that "responsible  
*ought* arose"

whereby the creature kenneth the creator's Will,  
that, in stillness of sound speaking to gentle souls,  
dowereth all silence with the joy of his presence;  
but to men savage or superstitious a voice  
of horror, maleficent, inescapable,  
hounding them with fearful conviction of sin, as when  
Adam in Eden hid from the scour of God's eye,—  
which old tale of displeasur is true to life.

But what Nature in her crowning glory of wisdom  
and beauty could not articulate of God's holy and  
loving personality, and the inner light of man but  
dimly descry, shone forth resplendently in the  
sacred humanity of Christ. Jesus to St. John is not  
only the end of the Law and the Prophets, but the  
climax of all Creation, and as such the Light of the  
World. Through all "the dread machinery of sin  
and sorrow," which might "confound me else," as  
Robert Browning's Pope reflects, one purpose stead-  
ily unfolded from the beginning—the revelation  
that Eternal Love thrilled through the universe, and  
the planting of that truth securely in the human  
consciousness, only perfectly disclosed and accom-  
plished when

the Word had breath, and wrought  
With human hands the creed of creeds



In loveliness of perfect deeds,  
More strong than all poetic thought;  
Which he may read that binds the sheaf,  
Or builds the house, or digs the grave,  
And those wild eyes that watch the wave  
In roarings round the coral reef.

Nor was this only a perfect disclosure of the Divine to mankind within the limits of human nature; for this end marked a new upward turn for the race. In this Gospel lay the promise of man's complete redemption "unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."<sup>a</sup> Thus in the eternal plan of the Creator:

all tended to mankind. . . .  
But in completed man begins anew  
A tendency to God.

Though this creed concerning, or vision of, the ultimate being and purpose of the whole universe, sublime and almost overwhelming, has been given in every generation—in the present no less than in those which are past—philosophical and theological confirmation and elaboration, it is not yet the fruit of reason. It is primarily the fruit of faith, faith lit at the altar fire of the eternal Christ. These lines from *The Book of the Holy Graal*, by Arthur Edward Waite, sing themselves into the mind:

<sup>a</sup> *Ephesians* iv, 13.

Thy Word is buried in the heart of man,  
Below the life of sense:  
Of all creation Thou art life and plan,  
The essence and the immanence.  
But, ah, for us the hidden Godhead sleeps  
In cosmic Nature and is veiled in ours,  
Till something calls it from unsounded deeps  
To rise within us and unfold its powers.  
Then shall great Nature stir  
And putting sleep for us away from her  
Shall also wake.  
How shall that morning break?  
O not in East or West alone  
And not from here or there:  
At once and everywhere  
The Christ Who comes within is seen and known,  
The voice of life is heard,  
Life of all life and Word.  
O admirable Presence, Voice Divine,  
Thy world is ours and mine;  
And to thy light, transfigured, shall respond  
In light the worlds without us and beyond.

## II

One of the very remarkable features of the sacred Gospels is that they are so written as to make all men the contemporaries of Christ and Christ the contemporary of all time. Nowhere, perhaps, has this been given such alluring expression as in the works of certain medieval artists. In their pictures they may be seen to have placed saints of their own day

and country among the disciples who actually journeyed with the Master in the days of His flesh. This they did knowing full well how prone such were to steal daily through the open door of the Gospels within that hallowed circle, saying:

To me, that story,—ay, that Life and Death . . .

it was—it is;

—Is, here and now: I apprehend nought else.<sup>4</sup>

Now it seemed good to ascend the mount of beatitude and listen to the Great Teacher in St. Matthew unfold His Gospel of love as the supreme principle of life in God and man; and again to linger by the wayside with the sympathetic Friend and Saviour in St. Luke and sense His redeeming heart. When hope burned low and courage waned, then it was well to join the train of the intrepid Messiah in St. Mark who strides forward to judgment and death in Jerusalem, writing *en route* His kingdom hope in letters of fire on the clouds of heaven, because confident that His mission had behind it all the omnipotence of God and could not be worsted by the most evil machinations of men. But they were prone to tarry long and lovingly with St. John; for it is to an entrancing spiritual romance to which he invites by

<sup>4</sup> Archbishop Temple (*Foundations*, p. 216) writes: "Brown-ing: *A Death in the Desert*,—the best commentary on St. John's Gospel." This and other suggestions of his have been heeded.

his "Come and see!" <sup>6</sup> To be drawn within the orbit of the infinitely lovable Lamb of God, full of grace and truth, who dwells in the bosom of the Heavenly Father—the same Person as is depicted in the other Gospels, is to stand, he wistfully insinuates, in the presence of the Veritable God and Eternal Life, Whom to follow with deep inwardness is to grow into that vision when

in the fellowship of the friendship of Christ  
God is seen as the very self-essence of love,  
Creator and mover of all as activ Lover of all.

Thought moves here within the atmosphere of the profound mystical doctrine that "the condition of all knowledge is that the subject should become like to the object,"—a doctrine that finds supreme expression in the beatitude of Jesus: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The conviction that Christ is at once the finest flower of humanity lifted up to God, and the fairest blossom of heaven let down to earth, came to St. John, not by way of reasoning, but as the result of deep inner experience and abundant spiritual growth. Thus his most hallowed Gospel, Prologue included, is but the grand type of the one which with growing clearness and fullness comes to be written on the interior parch-

<sup>6</sup> *St. John* i, 39.

ment of the Christianized imagination of every devoted follower. Hence there may be, so to speak, as many *Fourth Gospels* as there are those who by silent brooding on the holy, radiant and redeeming personality of the Master have passed through the veil,—that is to say, His flesh, to the ineffable secret that lies behind; which way Martin Luther would alone allow was the true path to the knowledge of God. St. Paul also touched upon the same deep truth when he said: "No man can say: Jesus is Lord, save in the Holy Spirit." ° But while to him the Christ of history remained ever somewhat vague and shadowy, to St. John and to all who have succumbed to the spell of his Orphic song:

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,  
Or decomposes but to recompose,  
Becomes my universe that feels and knows.

### III

Since very early times, however, it has been pleasant for Christian people to remember that the New Testament also records the Gospel of the Saviour's birth and infancy. Though there was something elevating and inspiring in the thought of Jesus as a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek; yet that He was born at a moment in time; that He was

° I *Corinthians* xii, 3.



a prattling infant on a mother's knee, have been considered links with common humanity altogether too precious to forget; while they have also been seen to constitute a phase of the Divine self-manifestation no less important than the cruel agony on the Cross.

The story of the first Christmas, as given by St. Matthew and St. Luke, is of surpassing charm and beauty. Nothing has so captivated the Christian mind and imagination in all ages as this tale of wonder. Never was Nativity theme woven into language with such exquisite and delicate art. Ere now it has inspired many gracious comments, but none finer than have come from the pen of Principal A. M. Fairbairn. Contrasting the reverent and restrained character of the Canonical records with the gross and gossipy manner of the Apocryphal Gospels he says:

Our narratives are pure as the air that floats above the eternal hills; are full, too, of an idyllic sweetness like the breath of summer when it comes laden with the fragrance of garden and field. The lone, lovely, glad, yet care-burdened mother; the holy beautiful Child, bringing such unsearchable wealth of truth and peace to men; the meanness of His birthplace, the greatness of His mission. . . . these all together make, when read in the letter but interpreted by the spirit, a matchless picture of earthly beauty and pathos illumined and sublimed by heavenly love.

The Nativity Idylls are not for any time, nor for any mood. Something of their own atmosphere is required in reading, as the appreciation of a great poem and an old Sangraal romance call for a tone of mind akin to that which gave them birth. They are the creation of an indefinable spirit, whose inner essence is reverence and love, a spirit best known to poets, to whom historic facts or any other never remain *bare*, as they inevitably do to the strictly scientific temper. Be they natural elements to St. Francis of Assisi, a lovely maiden to Dante, the moon to Shelley, a mountain to Coleridge, children to Wordsworth, Arthurian legend to Tennyson, sinning and suffering men and women to Browning, one and all they become clothed with beauty, wonder and awe, and not by mere imposition, but by spiritual perception. In deep mystical mood, William Blake once wrote to a friend:

What when the sun rises do you see? A round disk of fire, something like a guinea? Oh, no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.

If the dawn of a natural day revealed so much to the "twofold vision" of Blake, it is not surprising that devout and loving minds, dwelling long and reverently on the rise in the world of the Sun of

Righteousness, should have seen and heard equally wonderful things, and should have been seeing and hearing them ever since as the Nativity Festival came round each year. For this was the Birthday of Him whose life, death and resurrection disclosed Eternal Love as the soul of this vast universe, thus redeeming it to its very center. A Cosmos that found expression in this new Orpheus, "whose music is the gladness of the world," must be rhythmical to the core.

God on His throne is  
Eldest of poets:  
Unto His measures  
Moveth the Whole.

Trees in their blooming,  
Tides in their flowing,  
Stars in their circling  
Tremble with song.

After the marvellous sweep of this Son of God across the highway of the world, in His pilgrimage from eternity to eternity, all was different. Not only was Palestine made holy, but the whole world—so soon as the divine sanctity pent up in His human personality was fully released by death, as the alabaster cruse of precious ointment, when bruised and broken, fills the air with its ravishing fragrance.

Little wonder that sad and sorrowing women quickly began to see shining angels seated in the vacant tombs; that men, even humble shepherds, prone to dread the dark unknown above their heads, seething as it seemed with mischievous and malicious demons, should see and hear them there as well. In the Christian Gospel of divine life, light and love lay a fund of new ideas, values and powers which worked wonders in the human heart. Not the least of its blessings was its destruction of fear, which not only hath torment, but smears as with smoke-grime the windows of the soul. It belongs to the very nature of Christian love to create its own light and joy and peace, because it is not altogether self-created. In the conclusion of his thrilling poem, *Saul*, Robert Browning has given beautiful expression to its enhancing and illuminating power. David, the shepherd lad from the hillsides of Bethlehem, with "God's dew on his golden hair," having successfully weaned the king from his black melancholy by the stirring strains of the harp, is pictured tripping home to his flock like one transported. He loved Saul and gave himself for him. And now as his own soul throbs in unison with the self-sacrificial love of the Creator, the whole wide universe answers him with a like emotion—angels and powers and

stars of the night, the grey hills of morning and the shuddering forests, the beasts of the field and the birds of the air:

The same stared in the white humid faces upturned by the  
flowers;  
The same worked in the heart of the cedar and moved the  
vine-bowers:  
And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent and  
low,  
With their obstinate, all but hushed voices—"E'en so, it  
is so!"

The life and ministry of Jesus, not omitting the Holy Nativity, is, so to speak, like the garment He wore, a seamless robe. There is virtue in the very hem, even for the touch of superstitious and hesitating faith. The Babe in swaddling clothes, no less than the risen Redeemer in white and dazzling raiment, may draw the soul within the realm of Eternal Love. The Nativity Idylls form as proper a preface to St. John, following the Prologue, as they do to any of the other Gospels. These words of the aged apostle, spoken to his loving and solicitous disciples as he lay dying in the desert cave, need exclude nothing in the Fourfold Gospel all the way from the starlit manger at Bethlehem to the wistful hour on the Mount of Olives:

withdraw your sense  
From out eternity, strain it upon time,  
Then stand before that fact, that Life and Death,  
Stay there at gaze, till it dispart, dispread,  
As though a star should open out, all sides,  
Grow the world on you as it is my world.





THE CREATION OF CHRISTMAS

*Tu lumen et splendor Patris,  
Tu spes perennis omnium,  
Intende quas fundunt preces  
Tui per orbem servuli.*

*Hunc astra, tellus aequora,  
Hunc omne quod cælo subest,  
Salutis auctorem novæ  
Novo salutat cantico.*

*Thy Sire's Essential Light art Thou,  
And beacon-light of hope for all:  
Then shine upon Thy children's hearts,  
That look to Thee, while shadows fall.*

*This day, all Nature greets with joy:  
The skies, the seas, the wintry earth,  
Unwonted gladness wear, and hymn  
The morn which gave to them Thy Birth.*

Part of the Christmas Vesper Hymn, as  
rendered by CHARLES WITHAM HERBERT,  
and found in FATHER RICKABY'S *Spiritual  
Exercises Of St. Ignatius Loyola.*

## CHAPTER II

### THE CREATION OF CHRISTMAS

#### I

THE precise day, season and year in which Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the King have not been revealed. Nor is it possible now, be Christian historians never so diligent, to determine these matters with any generally acceptable degree of certainty.

December 25, as the day on which to feast the Word made flesh, was adopted by the Church in Rome in the middle of the fourth century when that city by position and prestige had become the recognised center of ecclesiastical administration in the Western World. The choice may, or may not, represent a true tradition. It is impossible to say. The question is not a serious one. A decision was reached. The time of the Winter Solstice, according to the Julian Kalendar which then obtained, was fastened upon; and when regard is had to the times, this action may be seen to be happy, commendable and almost inevitable.

## II

In the ancient world it seemed everywhere natural to the untutored mind of man to lift reverent and wondering eyes to the great sun in the heavens. The tale is fully enough disclosed in the myths, cults and legends of all primitive peoples. Nor are the reasons far to seek. Was he not the daily dispenser of light and warmth, the beneficent power whose "vast effulgence poured in awful grandeur" upon the earth, rendering it beautiful, fruitful and habitable for the children of men?

Most glorious Orb! thou wert a worship, ere  
The mystery of thy making was reveal'd!  
Thou earliest minister of the Almighty,  
Which gladden'd on their mountain tops, the hearts  
Of the Chaldean shepherds, till they pour'd  
Themselves in orisons! Thou material God!  
Sire of the Seasons! Monarch of the climes,  
Thou dost rise, and shine and set in glory!

Thought did not, of course, long remain for all on this level, not even in the fascinating form of Guido's famous painting, where the chariot of Apollo, drawn by fiery-footed steeds, is depicted ascending the aerial archway of the skies, accompanied by a glorious retinue of rejoicing divinities. Men won their way to ideas more spiritual and transcendental. The Divine was conceived to lie wholly outside the

realm of sense and time. Yet when and where this was so, the sun remained for all alike the burning image of the invisible and unknown Deity and the most perfect and suggestive symbol of the sphere of the Ideal. In those reaches of the human spirit, which may be roughly designated by the term mystical, light imagery continued to serve with an especial appropriateness, as it was afterwards to do among the mystics of the Christian Church. About the Ideas of Plato, for all lovers of his teaching, there shone a clear, pure light. To escape from the cave-world of shadows and be able to "look up" was to gaze into a realm of dazzling, and at first distressing, radiance, as when one should brave with the naked eye the noonday sun. Something of this sort was evidently incorporated symbolically into the ceremonies of the Mystery Religions which were popular around the time Christianity took its rise; for the beatific visions vouchsafed to the initiated could be described in words like these: "At dead of night, I saw the sun glowing with a brilliant light . . . and worshipped face to face."

The Old Testament Scriptures, as is very manifest, frequently ascribe to Jehovah the powers and qualities of sunlight. The prophets and psalmists take particular pleasure in this mode of speech. In His light men see light; while life under His un-



clouded countenance is the supreme benediction. Though the undying hope of Israel in a God-given redemption finds varied expression in their sacred writings, the great prophecy which juts out from the end of the Hebrew Canon, like a cresset flaming at night from some medieval tower, is of this sort:

But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings.<sup>1</sup>

No little of all this, from both Jewish and Gentile sources, passed into the thought and devotion of the Christian Church; for in a very real sense she became the heir of all the ages, therein early displaying her universality. But above all things she prized the Hebraic tradition which found its culmination in Christ, who spoke of Himself, not only as the Son of Man, but also as the Light of the World. Confronted with Mithra and Emperors, their rituals and festivals, proudly and with pardonable jealousy, she regarded her Lord and Saviour as *Lux Mundi*, *Sol Splendidissimus*, incomparable, deathless, supreme!

At no time was it forgotten that "the faith once for all delivered unto the saints" was wrought out on the stage of human history and through the medium of a human personality. But, strangely

<sup>1</sup> *Malachi* iv. 2. Cf. also the beautiful words of Isaiah, chapter lx.

enough, it was not until many generations had passed away that the faithful began to dwell with devotional fervor on the precise manner in which the Dayspring from on High first dawned upon this darksome world. When at length the august occasion demanded definite festal celebration, two dates made an especial appeal. The first was the Spring Equinox, March 25, when God was conceived to have performed the original act of creation and the work of his hands stood forth, beautiful and good, in the light of a sun new born. The second was the Winter Solstice, December 25, when the mighty parent of all life and fertility, having reached its greatest declination, began again to rise over the world with renewed power and splendor. As a matter of fact, both dates were made to serve the festive requirements of the Joyful Mysteries of the Incarnation, the Sacred Annunciation being assigned to the one and the Holy Nativity to the other.

Desirable as exact knowledge would have been regarding the Saviour's natal day and season, its absence never occasioned any deep sense of loss. On the contrary, there was probably gain. Reverent imagination was left all the more free to interpret and adapt the great event, which, of course, must have taken place at some time, to the æsthetic and

spiritual requirements of practical faith and devotion. Full advantage was taken of the freedom. As the generations passed, the Festival was enriched with ritual prayer and song, so that the faithful might be aided in their response to the wondrous revelation of God to mankind in Christ Jesus. The Feast on its religious side, after its due elaboration into the twelve-day period, was an artistic creation, the work of many devout minds. It became a part of the Church Year, which altogether is designed to tell a story, now an old, old story, beside which all others pale into insignificance. The ancient liturgies derive much of their value from the fact that they aim to place before the spiritual imagination that story—that ineffable romance of the Eternal in time and flesh, in order to show, with abundant shining examples for proof, how the prose narrative of human life may ever be transmuted into something of the epic grandeur of heaven.

The Bird of Paradise, so to speak, descended into the Church, as in the legend it came and laid the Golden Egg in the lap of the queen mother, who sorrowed to see her children, though they possessed so much to delight both ear and eye, still sad and unsatisfied. But Benjamin Thorpe must present the rest of his charming story in his own words and it will not require any comment.

The mother placed her soft white hand on the egg; and then what happened? The shell fell apart, and from it issued a being wonderful to behold . . . it was the glittering delight of childhood, itself a child, the wondrous bird *imagination*, the *popular tale*.

And now the mother saw her children no longer sad; for the Tale continued with the children, and they were never weary of it, and it was only after they possessed the Tale that the garden and the flowers, the arbours and the grottoes, the woods and the groves, afforded them true pleasure; for the Tale enlivened everything to their great happiness.

The Tale even lent them its wings, and they flew far away in the vast world, and, nevertheless, were at home as soon as they desired.

And as the children contracted an ardent love for the Tale, which sweetened their early days, and flew over every house and hut, over every castle and palace, so was its nature such that even those of maturer age found pleasure in it, provided only that in their riper years they possessed something which they had brought with them from the garden of childhood, a child-like simplicity of heart.

#### IV

From what has been said, one reason why the floral fire and beauty of spring have seldom been absent from the vision of the Holy Nativity may be apparent. This touch appears most distinctly in the art, poetry and devotion of the Middle Ages. But it may also be found in the earliest Latin hymns which extol the wonders of the Incarnation. At the very cry of

the Christ Child in the Manger, as these songs reveal, the snow is seen to melt and disappear; a verdant spring is communicated to the earth and fragrant flowers crop up everywhere. These sentiments, as regards form, owe something to the Annunciation season, more to Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*, and most of all, perhaps, to the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament which so generally envisaged the coming regeneration of the world in terms of the annual miracle of spring, when the earth re-clothes herself with fresh verdure and the trees once more put forth both bud and blossom. Behind the beautiful poetry lies profound truth. The writers were not mere sentimentalists. All that seers and prophets had spoken of the coming One, and the new era He would usher in, they knew to have been abundantly fulfilled in Christ. Into a world old, weary and disillusioned, a world that believed nothing deeply, whose literatures reflected little but guess, divination, doubt, mockery and despair, they saw the young Prophet of Galilee come to challenge His age in tones of absolute assurance concerning the Being and Nature of God and the meaning and destiny of human life. Peering into the Gospels they perceived One whose intellectual countenance was as the sun shining in its strength; while in hours of rapt attention they heard, as from the "hid battlements of eter-

nity," His trumpet sounding: "Behold I make all things new!"

The ancient Irenæus asks and answers his own question: "What new thing, then, did the Lord bring in coming? Know that He brought all newness in bringing Himself?" Behold the Divine Alchemist who came from heaven to reveal to men the secret whereby the base metals of human life might be transmuted into the pure gold of the Kingdom of God. His recipe is simple: Faith working through love, nought else than the Noble Tincture of His own Spirit, His *incendium Amoris* burning steadily in the Athanor of the soul till the great transforming work be all accomplished.

This message, never entirely lost, St. Francis recovered for the many in his day and age. In the *Divina Commedia* Dante sees him as a kind of second Christ come to warm and gladden the hearts of men, rising over the world, as it were, like the sun from the sacred East:

*nacque al mondo un sole  
Come fa questo tal volta di Gange.<sup>2</sup>*

Through this knight of the Holy Spirit Christmas became in a new sense "the festival of Christ for the renewing of man's faded fields." This is the theme

<sup>2</sup> Born to the world a sun as this one (our sun) is sometimes from the Ganges, that is, the East.



of Jacopone da Todi, one of the illustrious sons of Francis, whose life, like his master's was one long "poetic madness, a perpetual intoxication of Divine Love." To his age, knowing, as the present does, the withering blight of pessimism, the dreary chill of *accidie* and the bleakness of a world of discord, defeat and confusion, he cried:

*Natura umana, quanto eri scurata,  
Ch' al secco fieno tu eri arsimigliata!  
Ma lo tuo sposo t'ha renovellata:  
or non sie ingrata—de tale amodore.*

(O Human Nature, dark and poor and low,  
Like withered grass, a-droop for death to mow,  
Thy Bridegroom lifts thee up from sin and woe;  
Then bloom and grow,  
And thank thy Love and Lord!)

Those who have been reared among the mountains know that when their summits were shrouded in mist it was not long before the vapor crept down into the valley, shut out the light of sun and stars and chilled to the bone even those who sat around the family hearth; which thing is a parable. Many of the present-day peaks of thought do not, to say the least, loom up radiant in the sunlight of eternal truth. To not a few, in consequence, the world of human life wears a dreary, dismal, sunless aspect. In view of this fact, it is felt, the modern mind cannot

but turn to the religion of the Incarnation—all succinctly expressed in the Prologue to St. John's Gospel; for it lends real significance to the whole cosmic process and confers on human personality a nameless dignity. In its light the world can never be regarded as an "odd fellow," nor can man's existence on it ever appear to be without intelligible beginning, middle and end. The one, together with the vast universe of which it is a part, becomes the "ever growing garment of a transcendent God" and the other a rudimentary eternity.

Firmly established in the faith of the Incarnation St. Ignatius Loyola uttered some memorable words, which, taken deliberately into the mind, act like the clarifying tincture dropped into the glass of cloudy liquid: "I come from God; I belong to God; I am destined for God." But the opposite,—I come from dust; I belong to dust; I am destined for dust, instantly lowers the temperature of the mind, which the resultant inner sadness, to employ a figure and phrase from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*,<sup>a</sup> shakes inevitably into frost, disguise the fact to themselves as men may. The problem of individual life receives instant and joyous solution when the soul knows whence it derives, what it is, that to which it is called and whither it is going. This is already salvation,

<sup>a</sup> IV.

since it saves the whole human situation. By a supreme venture of faith, encouraged thereto by a great cloud of witnesses, and among them the best that ere wore earth about them, personal religion becomes union with God as the final beatitude of being; to be sought and progressively attained through Christ in His Community, who is therein, as it were, the right hand of the Eternal proffered unto mankind toward that ineffable end. And it follows as the night the day, when the "*mind* is right, the *hand* does right." The religion of the Incarnation is replete with new sanctions. It renders "the humblest act of selfless love invincible"; because "it is using the mainspring of the universe." It is interesting to remember that *The Testament of Beauty* by Robert Bridges, the late Poet Laureate of England, extols this faith, and so becomes not only the noblest poem which the twentieth century has thus far seen, but also in a new, rich and unprecedented sense the greatest "Christmas Carol" the Christian ages have produced.

## IV

But *lux in tenebris* also became one of the strong and happy notes of Christmas. The Holy Nativity was placed in the time of winter desolation. As the Festival came round each year splendor was conceived to break forth from the dark skies and in the

dismal cattle shed the Light of the World was born.

Historic devotion, however, has had small concern with the Birth of Christ as a past and outward event. It was viewed spiritually and mystically:

Hail, O Sun, O blessed Light,  
Sent into the world by night,  
Let Thy rays and heavenly powers  
Shine in this dark soul of ours!

There are two main ways, it seems, in which the relation of God to the human soul has been regarded through the Christian centuries; and both are to be found in the New Testament. In the first, the language and proceedings of the courtroom have been employed. God is then conceived as the righteous Judge and man the guilty prisoner at the bar. In the second, He is thought of in terms of sunlight falling upon the earth with all its healing, illuminating, beautifying and fructifying powers. In the one case, by means of forensic metaphors, the Divine is viewed standing over against man; in the other, He shines out through the depths of the soul. With characteristic boldness Meister Eckhart says:

Simple people conceive that we are to see God as if He stood on that side and we on this. It is not so. God and I are one in the act of my perceiving Him.

This is the unmistakable language of the mystic and it communicates at once to religious experience a definite divine content. But, and wholly aside from particular modes of speech, it is always best, our wisest teachers aver, when both wise and simple endeavor to hold in the mind, as the systole and diastole of vital faith, the twin-conception, namely: that God is graciously near, nearer to the heart than it is to itself; also that He is the absolutely Other, Holy and Ineffable, who dwells in light unapproachable and evokes the mind's deepest reverence and awe. This, of course, will not be taken to mean that the complementary truth is absent in the teaching of the German mystic. It is not; indeed it finds at times expression in language not unlike that which has just been used. But this is hardly the place to discuss—assuming one were able, which were a great claim—so strange and elusive a spiritual genius as Meister Eckhart.<sup>4</sup>

No language, of course, can be at all adequate to describe the Infinite Reality of God. If men do not understand the nature of their own spirits—whether what they call the soul is in the body, or the body in the soul, how may they discourse with confident certainty and precision concerning the Divine Being? "But," writes James Martineau, quite after the man-

<sup>4</sup> Professor Rufus Jones will prove an admirable guide to Eckhart. See his *Studies in Mystical Religion*, chap. XII.

ner of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and many, many another down to the present day, "the confession of our ignorance once made, we may proceed to use such poor thought and language as we find least unsuitable to so high a matter; for it is the beginning of religion to feel, that all our belief and speech respecting God is untrue, yet infinitely truer than any non-belief and silence."

Allowing, as they do, for greater richness and variety of expression, poets, and also mystics, have much preferred the light analogies to those of the criminal bench, if, indeed, they have ever been much drawn to the latter at all. The mysterious sunlight breaking over the world in the softened splendor of dawn, before which darkness and mist-wreathes vanish away: burning with equal munificence on cottage pane, mansion casement and cathedral window: glistening in playful mood on sea, lake and stream, though no human eye behold it: piercing the sullen cloud-bank with shafts of amber light: etching the magic rainbows on the falling rain: pouring in golden radiance from a clear, blue sky and producing growth, leaf, fruit and all the floral objects of beauty and delight: tinting with varied hues in the last hour of daily decline all but the earth-born vapors, spoke to them of spiritual truths which no courtroom could ever quite suggest.

Without the symbolism of light Dante could never



have written the *Paradiso*. Motion and music, indeed, play their part; but not to the same degree as light. The poem opens with the words:

*La gloria di colui che tutto move  
Per l' universo penetra, e risplende  
In una parte più, e meno altrove.*<sup>5</sup>

With Beatrice the pilgrim passes from one heaven to another, each shining in varying degrees of brightness with the splendor of God, till finally the souls of the blessed are seen as the snow-white petals of the

*rosa sempiterna,  
Che si dilata, digrada e redole  
Odor di lode al sol che sempre verna.*<sup>6</sup>

The ineffable reality of that "light up yonder" in its relation to the human soul on earth—God at once immanent and transcendent, finds perfect and unforgettable expression in this brilliant gem from *The Testament of Beauty*:

Beneath the spaceless dome of the soul's firmament  
he liveth in the glow of a celestial fire,  
fed by whose timeless beams our small obedient sun  
is as a cast-off satellite, that borroweth  
from the great Mover of all; and in the light of light  
man's little works, strewn on the sands of time, sparkle  
like cut jewels in the beatitude of God's countenance.

<sup>5</sup> The glory of Him who moveth all penetrates through the universe and shineth in one part more and in another less.

<sup>6</sup> The Eternal Rose, which spreads itself, row upon row, and breatheth perfume of praise to the Sun of Eternal Spring.

In a very intimate and beautiful manner the symbolism of light has been bound up with Christmas thought and devotion from the very beginning. It is abundantly revealed in Nativity carols and hymns. Henry Vaughan strikes a common note:

Awake, glad heart! get up and sing!  
It is the birthday of thy King.  
Awake! Awake!  
The sun doth shake  
Light from his locks, and all the way  
Breathing perfumes, doth spice the Day.

Art, too, has employed it with singular effect. The painters seldom, if ever, missed "the many-splendoured thing" at Bethlehem. They saw, as their works often enough attest, the humble bed of straw, on which the Sacred Babe lay, all ablaze with the glory of the Infinite. But the historic liturgies, which also reveal this, show in their fabrics, if one may so express it, a warp of numinous strands crossed with a woof of luminous silken threads. In the Roman Missal, however, there is a *Proper Preface for Christmas* which may be said to cast around the whole Festival an atmosphere of heavenly light. It is one of the many rare jewels in which this office book abounds. Praise, it declares, is meet, right and the bounden duty of all Christians at Christmas time. The reasons

are many; but higher than this mere words cannot carry:

*Quia per incarnati Verbi mysterium, nova mentis nostræ oculis lux tuæ claritatis infulsit: ut dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur.*

(Because by the mystery of the Word made flesh, from Thy brightness a new light hath risen to shine on the eyes of our souls, in order that, God becoming visible to us, we may be borne upward to the love of things invisible.)

THE ANNUNCIATION

*Wherfore in laude, as I can best and may,  
Of thee and of the white lily flour,  
Which that thee bare, and is a maide alway,  
To tell a storie I wol do my labour;  
Not that I may encresen hire honour,  
For she hireselven is honour and rote  
Of bountee, next hire son, and soules bote.*

CHAUCER, *The Prioress's Tale—  
The Canterbury Tales.*

## CHAPTER III

### THE ANNUNCIATION

#### I

THE Annunciation, while appropriately removed as a Festival from the celebration of the Holy Nativity, has always been regarded as most intimately bound up with it in thought and in reality. It is the first intimation, the venerable Bede was wont to say, of the joyous Christmas tidings. Then began, the Church throughout the ages has believed, that romance of the Eternal in time which constitutes the glory of the Christian religion.

Christianity thus took its rise, not in court, senate or academy, but in the bosom of a home; even as afterwards it was to receive exposition by Jesus and His apostles in the language of domestic life and love, fellowship and service.

Sparse as the information is respecting the Virgin in the Gospels, anyone so disposed may form a fairly clear mental picture of her; and it can hardly fail to be other than a most gracious one. Among those holy



families, plainly recognised in the early narratives of St. Matthew and St. Luke, who waited patiently for the consolation of Israel, Mary was born and lived:

as it were,  
An angel-watered lily, that near God  
Grows and is quiet.

As her tender years passed into young womanhood, she unfolded, flower-like, into those graceful qualities of mind and heart which heaven occasionally grants to restore among men the ever-vanishing radiance of religion. When she comes definitely into view, it is as a perfect embodiment of the deep piety of ancient Israel, in mystic phrase, "oned" with God in the pure depths of her devout and loving soul. This is what Meister Eckhart meant when he said: "Had Mary not borne God in ghostly (spiritual) fashion first, he never had been born of her in flesh." In the opening chapter of *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*, Arthur Edward Waite pauses for a moment in his exposition to make mention of this as the ultimate secret of the complex reverential devotion to the Virgin, which has attained such heights in the Latin Church. He writes: "Among other things, she has always recognised in the withdrawn and most holy part of her consciousness that she who conceived Christ—by the desire of the mystery of God satisfied out of all measure in a consummated

marriage of the mind—had entered through her humanity into assumption with the Divine, and was to be counted no longer merely among the elected daughters of Zion.”

With singular brevity and restraint the Annunciation story is given by St. Matthew and St. Luke: the one narrating it from the side of Joseph and the other from that of Mary. The quiet grace and loveliness, the brooding sense of something ineffably sacred, characteristic of the Lukan account, are such as to have caused many to remark concerning it: This seems like an excerpt from the secret scroll of a holy woman’s memory. How apt are the words of Principal A. M. Fairbairn: “Its theme, hardly to be handled without being depraved, is touched with the utmost delicacy. The veil where it ought to conceal does not reveal; where it can be lifted, it is lifted softly, and neither torn nor soiled.” What the narrative fails to say, it will soon be evident when read,<sup>1</sup> is as significant as that which it relates. No hint is conveyed concerning the season of the year, or the time of day, when the Angel appeared. Nor is any suggestion given as to how the Maiden was employed, or even what she looked like. And the heavenly Ambassador departed, leaving only a mysterious promise, it would seem, for the future.

<sup>1</sup> *St. Luke* i, 26-38.

## II

From an early date, however, theologians and artists, and following them plain people, began to fill out the Scriptural picture with the most expressive and realistic detail.

The Annunciation, as already hinted, was placed in the springtime when birds began to chatter in the budding trees and to build their nests and when flowers sprang up afresh to greet the smiling sun. Alluding to Nazareth, the home of Mary, Stopford Brooke writes:

The village lay surrounded by its curving hills, hidden, like a cluster of stamens in the cup of a flower, from the gaze of men, most like in its lowly and concealed position to the character of "the handmaid of the Lord." The grassy slope on which it stands is still more haunted by flowers than any other spot in Palestine, and it is not without an inherent fitness that the Roman Church has ever connected the Virgin with all the unconscious loveliness, and with all the freshness, delicacy, and carelessness of ostentation which mark the life of flowers.

Ere a suitable hour of the day was fastened upon for the visit of the Angel to Mary, reverent imagination canvassed the proprieties of various times. That delightful story in the Book of Genesis, which describes three angels appearing to Abraham and Sarah in the plains of Mamre, strongly appealed, but

could not sustain its claim to permanent consideration. Though Isaac was looked upon as a type of Christ, there was something incongruous about the time of his annunciation—the heat of the day.

The two portions of the day to which the religious mind in all ages and among all peoples has been instinctively drawn are early morning and early evening. It was not only, or supremely, for decorative or didactic purposes that stained-glass windows were incorporated into the architecture of the Christian Church; nor even, though they served this purpose, that the eyes of celebrant and communicant might dwell on no profane object during the solemn act of worship; rather were they designed to exclude the glare of day and to create within the hallowed enclosure those conditions of twilight calm so propitious to the spirit of devotion and meditation.

Early legend was wont to place the Annunciation out in the open air near a spring or well "at the northwest extremity" of the village of Nazareth, whither the Virgin had gone at early morn to draw water. This also, no doubt, owed something to the romantic story of Rebekah in the Book of Genesis. Only a voice was heard by Mary; though art could scarcely leave it unembodied.

Slowly, but surely, thought tended more and more toward evening and within doors. This was the

most restful part of the day, especially to the humble toilers of mankind, and to this class Joseph and Mary belonged, as the *Magnificat* and the family avocation clearly indicate. In the fourteenth century the *Ave Maria* came to be said at sunset—a custom which in no long time transformed the secular bells of evening rest and safety into the heavenly tones of the *Angelus*. Peals which erstwhile were a signal to guard carefully the glowing embers on the domestic hearth became a call to tend devoutly the spiritual fire on the altar of church and home and in the private heart. Release from labor in the field and garden, when darkness began to enwrap the earth, was henceforth to be hallowed by thoughts old and new of love and hope and peace.

Ave Maria! blessèd be the hour!

The time, the clime, the spot, where I so oft  
Have felt that moment in its fullest power

Sink o'er the earth so beautiful and soft,  
While swung the deep bell in the distant tower,

Or the faint dying day-hymn stole aloft.

And not a breath crept through the rosy air,

And yet the forest leaves seem'd stirr'd with prayer.

By the fourteenth century it came to be taken for granted by all concerned that "the Annunciation occurred at the evening twilight *because* the *Angelus* prayer is read at that time." So it came to be believed,

and here devotional thought has rested, not likely ever to be disturbed, that while Mary was reverently wrapped in the prayer of silence the angel appeared to her.

Lowliest of women, and most glorified!  
In thy still beauty sitting calm and lone,  
A brightness round thee grew—and by thy side,  
Kindling the air, a form ethereal shone,  
Solemn, yet breathing gladness. . . .

For such high tidings as to *thee* were brought,  
Chosen of heaven! that hour: but thou, Oh, thou!  
E'en as a flower with gracious rains o'erfraught.  
Thy virgin head beneath its crown did bow,  
And take to thy meek breast the all-holy word,  
And own thyself *the handmaid of the Lord*.

In this attitude she became, for untold blessing and inspiration, the prime pattern of the mind bent in pure and lowly surrender to the Holy Invisible, wide open to "the rippling tide of love that flows secretly into the soul and draws it mightily back to its source," which render possible the perpetual re-incarnation of the Spirit of the Eternal in time and flesh. Thus writes Arthur Edward Waite in *The Book of the Holy Graal*:

and so the Word takes flesh  
Through all the ages. There is Bethlehem  
In every kingdom, country, shire and town.  
The world itself is Nazareth. Each man



And woman in the body-part of them  
 Is Bethlehem's stable. But the soul therein  
 Is seldom Mary, bearing Christ within.  
 Hence is the Hidden Church from age to age  
 In travail, working towards that perfect day  
 When Christ shall have been born of every soul.

By poets and artists the Angel was often represented bearing in his hand a lily, *Lilium candidum*,<sup>2</sup> of which an ancient herbalist says: "And though the leaves of the floure be white yet within shineth the likenesse of gold." Sometimes, again, he was pictured carrying a green or blossoming rod, or a sweet-smelling fruit. In High Heaven Gabriel is described to Dante as

*quegli che portò la palma  
 Giù a Maria, quando il Figliuol di Dio  
 Carcar si volle della nostra salma.*<sup>3</sup>

Here the palm-branch may be no more than a symbol of victory; while the blossoming rods would be inspired by the prophecies of Isaiah. But these and other emblems were frequently profoundly suggestive. Seldom were they mere decorative touches. They hinted what no pen or brush could portray—the sacred mystery of the Incarnation.

Ancient thought concerning the Virgin, following

<sup>2</sup> Pinturicchio's Annunciation is a fine example.

<sup>3</sup> That one who carried the palm below to Mary when the Son of God willed to take upon Himself our burden.

the Annunciation, held very closely, though not exclusively, to the symbolism of light. Sedulius sings:

Soon rises in that modest shrine  
The temple of the Lord Divine.

The fane to which Mary was compared was not a pagan one enclosed in darkness. She was likened to a Christian Church, whose striking difference lay in an apse or chancel window set toward the East, symbolical of the radiance of the Sun of Righteousness who brought life and immortality to light in the Gospel. So Wordsworth writes:

still we plant, like men of elder days,  
Our Christian altar faithful to the east  
Whence the tall window drinks the morning rays.  
That obvious emblem giving to the eye  
Of meek devotion which erewhile it gave  
That symbol of the dayspring from on high,  
Triumphant o'er the darkness of the grave.

This couplet from an old English carol employs a common simile:

As sunnè schineth throw the glas  
So Jhesu in his moder was.

When colored glass came to be used in the churches in medieval times, and "stained the white radiance" of the sunlight as it fell on the floor and walls of chancel and nave, the simile was even more sugges-

tive. For that Holy Thing which was to be borne of Mary was both human and divine; that is to say: the pure white light of God took human color and character by its transmission through the blue, gold and vermillion of the rose window of the spotless being of the Blessed Virgin.

## III

But the precise form which the Divine creative act assumed in and through Mary cannot be known. God leaves not all His footsteps uncovered; also to the mind of man, inquiring and penetrating as it may be, He has set limits. And there is a higher mood, poets, mystics and philosophers have taught, than that of unceasing questioning—whether confronted with the interior marvels of the atom, the gorgeous splendor of the nebula, the bubbling spring in the mountain that is to become a mighty river, or the rise of a new human being within another; it is reverent contemplation of the mystery vast and deep in all creation and most profoundly at the center of human personality with its capacities for partnership with the Creator.

Most assuredly, no mystery is so challenging as the appearance of the Son of Man on the stage of human history. Gazing into the deep wells of the Gospels, it is ever possible, even when the mood is

reverent, to mistake the pale reflection of our own face for that One Face which has become a universe that feels and knows. Even so, not all deem it necessary to relate that mystery to a Virgin Birth; yet to others it is precisely His moral and spiritual magnitude that renders the idea of such an origin wholly congruous. The Gospels derive their undying power from the fact that they hold the mystery of Jesus like gold embedded in quartz; although this figure is very inadequate. The narratives of the Annunciation, the Wondrous Birth, the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection and Ascension, one and all, express and preserve in the language of vision the sense of something unutterable that broke upon the world through Jesus Christ. They mark the landscape to which that One came, and in which He lay, knelt, slept and stood—almost transparent at times in the radiance of the Unseen, with the monumental exclamation: *numen inest!* (Deity is here!) shorn of which His whole story soon fades into the light of common day.

## IV

The manifest stillness of the Annunciation scene, as sketched by St. Luke, has not failed to impress those of a mystical temper of mind. To such an one, it may be surmised, occurred that most wistful of all

names for the Festival: "*The Day of Mary being whispered to.*" In the happy springtime, when that blest maiden was bent in evening devotion, or it may have been at the well in the morning, perhaps during the hours of slumber; for

mark it well:

Sleep has its sacraments, and God pours through,

the angel came and whispered to her his message of grace. The phrase, it is said, originated among the Manx people. One can well believe this, since it was a Manx poet who wrote that most exquisite poem which so readily links itself with the deep thought wrapped up in it and suggests yet another scene for the original Annunciation:

A garden is a lovesome thing God wot,  
     Rose plot,  
     Fringed pool,  
     Fern'd grot,  
 The veriest school  
     Of Peace; and yet the fool  
     Contends that God is not.—  
 Not God! in gardens! when the eve is cool!  
 Nay but I have a sign;  
 'Tis very sure God walks in mine.

This name for the Annunciation Festival can hardly be dismissed as no more than a sweetly pious phrase. It preserves for continual remembrance the

gracious and awesome thought that from the all-encompassing Spiritual Realm Divine messages may reach the inward ear of the heart "at leisure from itself" and also when it is not.

No poet, it seems, brought to the truth in the latter sense a more discerning and penetrating mind than Robert Browning. This forms, indeed, one of the most striking aspects of his poetry, which he touches with rare insight, often "to the despair of hell." The words of Bishop Blougram are familiar:

Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,  
A fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death,  
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears,  
To rap and knock and enter in our soul.

The distinguished ecclesiastic has obviously moved far away from the light banter which characterizes his speech in the opening part of the poem. He is fully aware of those mysterious admonitions, from which, he would remind his skeptical guest, not even the atheistical heart is free, subsumed by theologians and mystics under the term *Prevenient Grace*—"the grace that *goes before* the fuller blessing of communion with God in the regenerate life"—and described with remarkable power by Francis Thompson in *The Hound of Heaven*.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him down the arches of the years;



I fled Him down the labyrinthian ways  
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
     Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
     And shot precipitated,  
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,  
     From those strong Feet that followed, followed after  
     But with unhurrying chase,  
     And unperturbèd pace,  
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
     They beat—and a Voice beat  
     More instant than the Feet—  
 "All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

    .       .       .       .       .       .  
     Halts by me that footfall:  
     Is my gloom, after all,  
 Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?  
     "Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
     I am He whom thou seekest!  
 Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me."

Among the most significant of Browning's lines  
 in this connection are these:

I crossed a moor with a name of its own,  
     And a certain use in the world no doubt,  
 Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone  
     'Mid the blank miles round about;

For there I picked up on the heather,  
     And there I put inside my breast  
 A moulted feather, an eagle-feather!  
     Well, I forget the rest.

The primary reference, no doubt, is to Shelley soaring on the wings of lyric rapture into the deep empyrean blue, whose impact on Browning's soul meant the opening up to him of new worlds of thought and feeling. With this understanding of the poem in mind, Edward Berdoe, not without deep personal feeling, once wrote: "Some there are who love to say the same of Robert Browning." To this many would willingly add: "E'en so, it is so!" The world and human life do indeed wear a nobler aspect to the mind into which Robert Browning has descended. But the Poet's lines are endlessly suggestive. So many of his men and women experienced in the very throng of life the "flash of a trembling glance," received in strange moments apocalypses fearful and fugitive, saw a *something*, as it were, fall out all unexpectedly from the "sheltering world of Spirit," and thereafter knew life on higher levels of thought and action. John A. Hutton, dealing with this phase of the poet's thought, demonstrates at length how these purging and illuminating moments may arise from "every kind of circumstance;" but whatever the occasion: "It is always a moulted feather, an eagle-feather, always something that falls out of the sky, something that comes out of a pure world, which seems to bend over and embrace this world of ours; in fact it is always the whisper of God

Himself; for God is in all, and through all, and over all." Nor were even the hours of slumber, in the thought of Browning, devoid of subtle surprises, significant intrusions and arresting intimations from the Unseen:

So, love me, Pauline. . . .

One dream came to a pale poet's sleep,  
And he said, "I am singled out by God,  
"No sin must touch me" . . .

We will go hand in hand,  
I with thee, even as a child—love's slave,  
Looking no farther than his liege commands.

V

In a more benign sense, again, the Spiritual world concealed behind the moving drama of the visible world "murmurs its august secrets" to the heart of faith. This truth is not without an important place in the poetical books of the Old Testament. It is also writ large in the Gospels. Jesus, it is true, rooted religion in the fact of the Fatherhood of God and in the pure and humble heart; His image being that of the mutual relationship which exists between a child of six or seven and a wise, loving and devoted parent. In the wonder of His wisdom He placed it where it would suffice, alike for old and young, in all the simple, unsophisticated, deep and tragic moments of human experience. This is ever the soul of

His thought of God, like the fragrance in the heart of the flower, but He gave it body, color and variety by His fascinating parables, and by His attitude to Nature infused into it the spirit of mystery and awe. God to Christ was not only graciously near to the individual heart; He was also the interior pulse of all the forces of the material order and the inner spirit of its beauty. Hence to Him:

the earth  
And common face of Nature, spake  
Rememberable things.

Many, however, have tended to grasp by only one hand, so to speak, the rich and wide spirituality of the Divine Master. All too often Nature has been regarded by His followers as "a place of exile from God," mediating no spiritual message to the soul. It has been forgotten that the Creator, ere He gave the full manifestation of His redeeming love in Christ, nurtured the childhood of the race in the religion of Nature; that Jesus Himself passed through this school in the quiet of the countryside of Nazareth, as well as through those of the home and the synagogue; so that when the higher revelation came, the lower was not discarded, only sublimated. It remained, and still remains, that there might ever be added to the thought of God's loving personality re-

vealed in Christ the enhancing sense of "an impersonal glory, an indefinite splendor, to which we can affix no human attribute or name." A too intensely interior religion, untouched by the wonder and beauty of Nature which lifts the soul in adoration to the Power that made it and of which it is the outward and visible sign, may be illustrated by a reference to St. Bernard. By one writer he is pictured "travelling along the shores of Lake Lemán, noticing neither the azure of its waters, nor the luxuriance of the vines, nor the radiance of the mountains with their robe of sun and snow, but bending a thought-burdened forehead over the neck of his mule"; and so, albeit one of the rarest souls the medieval Church produced, missing entirely, as St. Francis and Walt Whitman did not do:

The rapture of the hallelujahs sent  
From all that breathes and is.

It is, of course, only proper to add that while St. Bernard's "remembrance of Jesus," which brought "true joy to the heart," was thus partial and incomplete, it was yet linked to beauty and adoring worship by numerous ties unknown to many at the present time. Instituted sacraments in suitable and consecrated surroundings, it need never be doubted, do somehow possess a deeper sanctity and a richer grace

than natural ones; but that only accords to the former a higher prerogative, not an exclusive one.

Reverent recognition of God immanent in all the wonder and beauty of Nature is not, it must be admitted, a very characteristic feature of medieval piety, nor for that matter of Catholic thought and devotion since the Middle Ages. It must be looked upon somehow as a phase of Protestant thought; at least it has appeared in that atmosphere; and this fact is of real interest to many. Were the poetry, to mention no more, which expresses delight in the things which God has made and made beautiful, eliminated from literature in the English tongue, how great would be the loss! In these days *The Testament of Beauty* has appeared to show that the spirit is as deep and true as ever. To demonstrate this by quotation would mean filling many pages; for that golden poem has this for its theme:

since ther is beauty in nature, mankind's love of life  
apart from love of beauty is a tale of no count;  
and tho' he linger'd long in his forest of fear,  
or e'er his apprehensiv wonder at unknown power  
threw off the first night-terrors of his infant mind,  
the vision of beauty awaited him, and step by step  
led him in joy of spirit to full fruition.

One portion for good grace may be given. It will serve to show how "the simplest impressions from



nature are the deepest and most devout"; and also how vision may be restored after it has been spoiled "with the artificial glasses of science."

The season it was of prodigal gay blossom . . .  
the common flowers starr'd the fine grass of the wold,  
waving in gay display their gold-heads to the sun,  
each telling of its own incontinent happiness,  
each type a faultless essence of God's will, such gems  
as magic master-minds in painting or music  
threw aside once for man's regard or disregard;  
things supreme in themselves, eternal, unnumber'd  
in the unexplor'd necessities of Life and Love.

William Wordsworth, however, teaches plainly enough that it is useless to carry his *Tintern Abbey* in the hand to some sylvan retreat on a summer afternoon, if *The Prelude* be not already in the heart; for no theophanies will come. It is not, of course, difficult to read this poet's verse and thoroughly enjoy it after a fashion; but it is quite another thing to follow him according to the way set forth in that great educational poem. What he there and elsewhere counsels as necessary to a true vision of Nature are complete freedom from all "self-seeking," all "low cares and mean desires," even from the pursuit of wealth, which is never

Without some hazard to the finer sense,

and the positive acquisition of a "wise passiveness" and a "happy stillness of the mind"; requisites easy

enough to acknowledge, but offering a stiff challenge in attainment. "It is a high standard," Miss Caroline F. E. Spurgeon writes, "which is held up before us. . . . The steps in the ladder of perfection, as described by Wordsworth, are precisely analogous to the threefold path or 'way' of the religious or philosophical mystic." In other words, this may be said to mean that *Tintern Abbey*, to speak of no other poem, is the breathing of a great spiritual achievement, behind which lies much, if not substantially all, of what Dante meant by painful progress up the Purgatorial Mount: by drinking of the waters of Lethe and Eunoë: by standing at last beside the radiant Beatrice in the Terrestrial Paradise at full noon, every film removed from the windows of the soul—"pure and disposed to mount to the stars," and destined for the high beatitude in which the *Paradiso* finds its climax. The inner spiritual meaning of all the sad and solemn beauty of the *Purgatorio*, with its discipline and climbing, its exhortation and worship, is that the soul being delivered from the seven deadly sins of egotism and re-conditioned to pure and selfless life in terms of the beatitudes of Jesus may find itself and that "mystic chord which vibrates to the breath of the Unseen." In *The Book of the Holy Graal*, Arthur Edward Waite states it well:

Thus are we loosen'd always in the great  
High things of being and are bound alone

In law of trifles. God and His good ends  
 Are reach'd in liberty; the lesser self  
 spins ropes, makes rivets, forges heavy chains  
 To yoke itself, and perishes therein.  
 Yet from that body of death may the live self  
 Rise up to vindicate the race thereof,  
 The freedom and the royalty in God.

William Wordsworth, however, tells us quite frankly toward the end of *The Prelude*—as Dante, to the everlasting perplexity of his commentators, nowhere does plainly in *The Divine Comedy*, nor elsewhere for that matter—the sins he did not commit and therefore needed not to expiate and cleanse away.

## VI

While enswathed in the vast unity of all things,  
 at the base of his being man is ever the great solitary:

Yes: in the sea of life enisl'd,  
 With echoing straits between us thrown,  
 Dotting the shoreless watery wild,  
 We mortal millions live *alone*.  
     The islands feel the enclaspings flow,  
     And then their endless bounds they know. . . .  
     A God, a God their severance rul'd;  
 And bade betwixt their shores to be  
 The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea.

No one seemed more profoundly impressed than Amiel, as his *Journal* reveals, with the strange, deep

silence and seclusion of man's hermit spirit. Yet he very significantly adds: "But there is nothing to prevent us from opening our solitude to God." No, there is nothing, the masters of the spiritual life teach, save the obstacle of an averted and restless mind; for in St. Augustine's words: *Dominus non in commotione* (God is not in restlessness). Still, they also teach that as the depths of the ocean know no agitation, though the waves above be driven with the wind and tossed; so the deeps of the soul, for all the fretful foam on the surface, remain in imperturbable calm. When the mind is distressed by gales of its own creation, then God is not; for He dwells above and below all mental commotion:

*Besänftige dein Herz; Gott ist in starken Winden,  
In Erdbewegungen und Feuer nicht zu finden.*

(Have quiet in thy heart; for God is sought in vain  
In Fire, in Earthquake, in the roaring Hurricane.)

Because of this, it becomes true: "Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness." So it must have seemed to the ancient Greek who spent an hour a day listening for the oracle of his own heart. Down at the center of peace man is fitted to be "alone to the Alone," formed for communion with the deep and silent God. It is the region described by Francis Thompson as the "ultimate heart's occult abode":

The hold that falls not when the town is got,  
The heart's heart, whose immurèd plot  
Hath keys your self keep not!

Its keys are at the cincture hung of God:  
Its gates are trepidant to His nod;  
By Him its floors are trod.

There, too, in Maeterlinck's picturesque phrase, "the angels dwell." Too near to shout, they whisper; and in all ages tranquil and listening spirits have heard in unmistakable tones their *Ave Dominus tecum!* and in the spirit of humble self-donation have said:

*fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.*<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> Hail, the Lord is with thee . . . be it unto me according to thy word. *St. Luke* i, 27, 38.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTMAS



*Doubt ye the force of Christmas on the soul?*

*The Ring and the Book, VIII, 381.*

*The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too. . . .*

*An Epistle, ROBERT BROWNING.*

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTMAS

#### I

ROBERT WILLIAM DALE opens one of his mighty discourses with these words: "The supreme fact in the history of the world—perhaps in the history of the universe—is that God has become man in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ." This is the Faith, it need scarcely be said, that led to the creation of Christmas. In the course of the centuries the Festival attracted to itself many elements which have made it beautiful and human; but the center and soul of all, to which everything else is subordinate and accessory, is that the Eternal God became flesh for man's sake.

When, as Christmas approaches, the streets of the cities are hung with lights and evergreens, the shop windows display their wares in tempting abundance, the houses within and without show their decorated trees, and friends and families vie with each other in the happy exchange of gifts and greetings—when, seeing all this the children inquire, "What mean ye

by these things?" they may be answered in these charming lines:

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love, all lovely, Love Divine;  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,  
Love Incarnate, Love Divine;  
Worship we our Jesus:  
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,  
Love be yours and love be mine,  
Love to God and all men,  
Love for plea and gift and sign.

How simply and graciously this is said by Christina Rossetti; yet how tremendous, challenging and awe-inspiring is the Christmas Faith which the verses extol! How utterly impossible for the human mind to grasp its full significance! That the infinite Creator and Sustainer of this vast sidereal universe entered time and history at a particular place, was born as all babies are, grew up into normal manhood, taught for a space of years among the children of men, looked upon their state with human eyes, touched them with a human hand, was crucified, dead, and buried, while remaining all the while the immanent and transcendent Creator and Lord of all,

is assuredly an astounding faith. Yet this is, admittedly stated somewhat baldly, the arresting mystery, the insoluble paradox, which in Christian thought has been and is called the Incarnation.

To state and safeguard it, not explain, the great Creeds of the early Church were formulated. In those days the winds of controversy raged so strongly that the apostolic faith, like the kites of youths on a blustery day, was in danger of being blown away, unless staked down firmly to earth. The Christmas Festival helped in this regard; though the real staples were the creeds. As expressions of faith and hope, they look now somewhat cold and stony. Many will prefer, no doubt, this statement of Robert Bridges, which, involving not less than six passages of Scripture,<sup>1</sup> presents to the mind in matchless form the moral and spiritual essence of the Christian religion:

This is thatt excelent way whereon if we wil walk  
all things shall be added unto us—thatt Love which inspired  
the wayward Visionary in his dóctrinal ode  
to the three christian Graces, the Church's first hymn  
and only deathless athanasian creed,—the which  
"except a man believe he cannot be savèd".  
This is the endearing bond whereby Christ's company  
yet holdeth together on the truth of his promise  
that he spake of his great pity and trust in man's love,  
*Lo, I am with you always, ev'n to the end of the world.*

<sup>1</sup> I Cor. xii, 31; xiii, 1-13; *Matthew* vi, 33; *Mark* xvi, 16 (A.V.); *John* xiii, 35; *Matthew* xxviii, 20, etc.

Yet many would not be slow to say that the Creeds when first created, if minted in the mind, proved fit music for the heart, and were, and might yet be, if received as poetry—certain clauses aside—and not as prose, beautiful words *To the Christians* like these of William Blake:

I give you the end of a golden string,  
Only wind it into a ball,  
It will lead you in at heaven's gate  
Built in Jerusalem's wall.

To most, however, their technicalities seem altogether as abstract and obsolete as the astral system of the *Divine Comedy*. Yet just as Dante's immortal message, though bound up with, is not dependent upon, his Ptolemaic astronomy; so the ancient and eternal truth of Christianity, it is shown, can be disengaged from the particular terminology of the Creeds. Melted down in the crucible of thought they yield this: Jesus "is as divine as the Father and as human as ourselves"—a truth which every believer in the Saviourhood of Christ knew by "the scholastic of the heart and the dialectic of the feelings." Still, to simplify the language is not to explain away the mystery; it is only to make it more evident.

## II

When confronted with the bewildering implications of the Faith of the Incarnation however stated

—that God has become man in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ—it is not at all surprising that the temptation to shrink back from it should be strong. The first thought that arises, perhaps, is its relation to the immensity of the universe as revealed by modern science, especially astronomy. The Cosmos is so vast, and man and his planetary home so small, that such an event as the Incarnation seems incredible, or too good to be true. But, it must ever be proper to ask, where comes in the significance of big and little to a Creator whose creation shows that the merest grain of salt is as wonderful as the brightest star in Leo? Henry Melvill Gwatkin's observation could hardly be bettered:

The worst fallacy is the assumption that God cares only for great things. A more unscientific position could hardly be imagined. There is no careless work in Nature. A gnat is made as accurately as a man, a microscopic *Heliopelta* turned as skilfully as a watchcase. If there is a God at all, things like these must be his doing, by whatever laws he does them. And if the evidence is overwhelming, that the minute things of the earth are not beneath his attention, we cannot assume that the earth itself and man are in such sense insignificant as to make it likely beforehand that he is too full of other work to give a revelation. This difficulty at all events is imaginary.

But, again, it is not unnatural to think that religion conceived "as a system of spiritual realities, unencumbered with the uncertainties of history," pos-



sesses, perhaps, a superior advantage over the religion of the Incarnation. It is much, it need not be denied, to believe that there exists, and more to be inwardly adjusted to, a Spiritual Order, pure, regnant and glorious, encompassing the souls of men as the very atmosphere enwraps the planet; waiting to be discerned, almost, so to speak, desiring to be manifested, if only earnestly sought. But this by itself, however alluring and impressive, would not, of course, yield anything like the Christmas Gospel. For in the picture language of the Creeds God had not then "come down"; and He would still remain in large measure the Great Unknown. Such "naked," though by no means fruitless, "apprehension" of the Transcendental Order, in which the mind must needs envisage and symbolize its moral and spiritual principles, values, powers, by whatever might seem most suitable and agreeable, can hardly be said to compare, even the most acute philosophers confess, with a religion which possesses a sacred history, most notably Christianity, in which the Divine is perfectly revealed in the human and the human in the Divine. For then the soul has a living, concrete and readily accessible mode of apprehending the Unseen and Eternal God, who otherwise for most must remain "lost to view in the *tenebræ eternæ*." Nor could it ever be proclaimed as "good news" like "God so

loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son;" truly in Rudolf Otto's phrase, which once read can never be forgotten,—"A Cape of Good Hope!" There are many ways, doubtless, whereby the human mind may lay hold on eternal life by faith in the transcendent. But "sitting i' the center" of things Christian, St. John says: "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." <sup>2</sup> The common human heart, in Christendom at least, never fails to find something inexpressibly wonderful and meaningful in such an outburst as that of young David in the dark pavilion of King Saul:

'Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for! my flesh, that  
     I seek  
 In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be  
 A face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,  
 Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever; a Hand like  
     this hand  
 Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the  
     Christ stand!

### III

While the learned continued to ponder and expound the precise manner and merits of the Incarnation, and have not ceased yet, nor ever will, Christmas came into being to bring into devotional focus

<sup>2</sup> *St. John* xvii, 3.

the actual entrance of the Eternal into time and flesh amid circumstances of great humility. The Festival became, so to speak, like a luminous rainbow in the sky, in the Biblical and also in the pagan sense of that fascinating phenomenon. It was at once a symbol of God's friendliness and grace and a bridge of Deity connecting heaven and earth, on which was inscribed in letters of gold St. John's divine poem on the uttermost gift of God to the world. It was not thus an argument to the unbeliever; it was a sacrament to the heart of faith; and throughout the generations it has been the joy and delight of the faithful.

Nothing is more entrancing on a beautiful summer day in June than to stand as close as possible to the Horseshoe Falls at Niagara and watch the mighty torrent pouring into the boiling cauldron; while the sun in playful mood pencils magic forms on the rising spray. But another and not less impressive view is obtained by climbing to the top of the cliff behind. On this vantage ground the whole majestic waterway is seen in magnificent outline. From the distant city comes the brooding, onward moving river, bending and plunging at last into the gorge which conveys its turbulent current into the calm of the nether lake. Both vistas, the near and the distant, are necessary to a full appreciation of that won-

der of Nature. So it is with the supernatural wonder of the Holy Nativity, which marks the first important point in the pilgrimage in the Church Year. Now it is something to be looked at closely and again to be seen as a part of the larger whole to which it belongs.

It is the distant view of the old, old story of Love Divine that Rudolf Otto bids his readers take in *The Idea of the Holy*. The particular chapter in which he counsels this is one of the most powerful and impressive in that altogether remarkable work. If one shall sink, as he directs, in contemplation upon what led up to Christ, then upon how well the whole stage is set for His appearing, and finally upon Him, he predicts an overwhelming sense of God operative in process and person. To the perceiving mind comes the "irresistible impression" that here shines the very splendor of God. But no mere summary can possibly convey the force and fervor of the author's own thoughts:

Whoever sinks in contemplation of that great connected development of the Judaic religion which we speak of as the "old covenant up to Christ" must feel the stirrings of an intimation that something Eternal is there, directing and sustaining it and urging it to its consummation. The impression is simply irresistible. And whoever then goes on to consider how greatly the scene is set for the completion of the whole story and the mighty stature of

the personality that is its fulfilment, his firm, unfaltering hold upon God, his unwavering, unfailing righteousness, his certitude of conviction and assurance in action so mysterious and profound, his spiritual fervour and beatitude, the struggles and trustfulness, self-surrender and suffering, and finally the conqueror's death that were his—whoever goes on to consider all this must inevitably conclude: "This is god-like and divine; this is verily Holiness." If there is a God at all and if He chose to reveal Himself, He could do it no otherwise than thus. Such a conclusion is not the result of logical compulsion; it does not follow from clearly conceived premises; it is an immediate, underivable judgment of pure recognition, and it follows a premise that defies exposition and springs directly from an irreducible feeling of the truth.

The spirit involved in these words is not unlike John Ruskin's *Theoria*, which he sets forth in *Modern Painters* as the "condition of true knowledge in art," the same spirit which produced the Gospel of St. John, when, in the language of William Wordsworth,

with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.

They may also be said to state one of the great values of the Church Year, which is broadly based on the historical life and ministry of Jesus, when the whole story, with its prologue and epilogue, are abstracted for purposes of meditation, as it was intended they should be.



But the Church Year, as conceived and provided for in the great liturgies, ordains periods of preparation preceding the various festivals; so that, being approached with due reverence and faith, the sojourn within the hallowed octaves, which bring the heart close to the events celebrated, might not be without some blessing and enrichment.

## IV

Advent, the four weeks' period immediately preceding Christmas Eve, is preëminently the season of hope. If, however, regard is had to the Breviary and Missal, there is, to be sure, a strange blending of elements; but still hope predominates. Now the soul is uplifted to God from whom cometh salvation and again bowed down in penitence; while ever and anon the undertones of joyous anticipation of Christmas is solemnized by awful notes, as of rumbling thunder, which speak of the second coming of Christ in great power and glory.

The last-named element of Christian belief is often a great perplexity to many, because they see no alternative to extreme literalism, on the one hand, and complete abandonment, on the other, and not infrequently choose the latter. This is unfortunate; for it is like casting away the baby with the crib.

In a mighty phrase, D. S. Cairns speaks of the



thought of the Parousia in the early Church resembling "some great eastern window that burns and shines in unearthly radiance and gorgeous hues in the splendor of dawn." *Sursum corda!* is the soul of its message. Then and later it was a perpetual reminder to the faithful that life's ultimate redemption lies not so much in human plans and processes, as in creative transcendental powers which shall descend upon the world through sons of men consecrated to Christ and to His glorious kingdom. In other words, it proclaimed the conviction that the only lever that could raise the world to the righteousness of God is one whose fulcrum rested firmly in eternity. This is the spiritual essence of all apocalyptic utterances in the Old and New Testaments, of which the Books of Daniel and Revelation are the most elaborate, when their tumultuous words, their unnatural and chaotic pictures have been made to surrender their hidden treasure of truth, as in Maeterlinck's essay on *Perfumes*, the flowers are shown to yield up, by a variety of powerful means, the fragrant secrets of their hearts, and "the liquid pearl, pure, essential, is at last gathered on a crystal blade."

In the ancient liturgies, as well as in historic devotion generally, the great idea of the Parousia has sparkled with many meanings. It has been regarded "as essentially an imaginative and spiritual form, be-

longing to the vision and poetry of faith," never to be narrowed down to one rigid and exclusive interpretation. Beside the first and the last, there are many "Comings of Christ"; and they are all contained in the profound teaching of St. John concerning the Eternal Coming of the Lord to His Church in the Spirit. "Behold the Bridegroom cometh, go ye forth to meet Him," is the text of John of Ruysbroeck's mystical work—*The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, which, suffused with deep moral, spiritual and evangelical fervor, is a fine exposition of the idea in terms of personal experience. How beautiful and replete with gracious significance appears the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, whether administered to infants or adults, when the entire rite is mystically viewed in terms of the River of Life flowing from the mediatorial throne of heaven, in whose cleansing current the whole congregation bathes a while and is clean. Holy Communion itself can have little practical meaning, save as the Sacrament of the real presence of God in Christ who comes to His people as redeemer and inspirer, and supremely as the creator and fashioner of human instruments whereby His goodness, beauty and truth may shine forth for the renewal and enrichment of the world.

But it is reasonable to suppose that one of the

prime purposes of Advent, perhaps the most original of all, was to create in the minds of the faithful a sense of the tremendous contrast between a world with and without Christ. It is a little difficult to imagine what the past nineteen hundred years would have been like had the Son of Man not come; but it is a subject that cannot fail to challenge thought and meditation. Viscount de Chateaubriand concerns himself with the matter in the last chapter of his *Genius of Christianity* and the picture offered is a striking one. Nor does it escape the attention of Robert Bridges in *The Testament of Beauty*; though he is more concerned with things as they have been and are. Sadly he records:

If we read but of Europe since the Birth of Christ,  
'tis still incompetent disorder, all a lecture  
of irredeemable shame; the wrongs and sufferings  
alike of kings and clowns are a pitiful tale. . . .

While loud and louder thro' the dazed head of the  
SPHINX<sup>\*</sup>  
the old lion's voice roareth o'er all the lands.

With master strokes the story of human disorder is told in the *Testament*. It is all due to a misapprehension of the purpose for which man was made—ignorance concerning the goal of human life. If regard be had to those "tall Goths," who "wer strong

\* Sphinx—"grand solitary symbol of man's double nature," I, 642.

but to destroy," to the follies and disasters which mark the succeeding centuries, to the dreadful World War with its aftermath of fear and perplexity, to the creators of the modern mechanistic and overspecialised age—"our economical bee-minded men," these words apply:

Not knowing the high goal of our great endeavour  
is spiritual attainment, individual worth,  
at all costs to be sought and at all costs pursued,  
to be won at all costs and at all costs assured.

With a mind full of the noble teaching of this great poem, M. L. V. Hughes remarks concerning the most significant phrase in these lines: "Individual worth means in the Testament a non-specialised, harmonious self, well nurtured with Beauty, well disciplined by interest, motivated by co-operation; and the quest of self in not-self, the capacity of friendship brought to its shining heights. 'This Individualism is man's true Socialism' (IV. 1423)." The Poet Laureate has small faith in politics and in statesmen as such to lead mankind toward a better day; or rather, he believed with his great master Plato that "good politics depends on good education"—education rooted by faith in Eternal Realities and nurtured by prayer and worship.

Hence cometh all the need and fame of TEACHERS, men of inborn nobility, call'd Prophets of God,

Saviours of society, Seers of the promised land,—  
 thatt white-filleted company that Aeneas found  
 circled around Musæus in the Elysian fields,  
 the loved and loveable whose names liv evermore,  
 the sainted pioneers of salvation, unto whom  
 all wisdom won and all man's future hope is due;  
 and with inspiration of their ampler air we see  
 our Ethick split up shear and sharply atwain; two kinds  
 diverse in kind ther be; the one of social need,  
 lower, stil holding backward in the clutch of earth,  
 from old animal bondage unredeem'd; the other  
 higher and spiritual, that by personal affiance  
 with beauty hath made escape, soaring away to where  
 the Ring of Being closeth in the Vision of God.

Though the darkness in the world is great, the poet is no pessimist; for through all Christ's "great light shineth!" This is also one of the strong and steadying notes of Advent, which may be fittingly expressed in these words from the Epistle to the Hebrews: "We see not yet all things put under him; but we see Jesus crowned with glory and honor." <sup>4</sup> Thus the observance of Advent has tended to keep the heart of the Church young and hopeful, forward and upward looking. It is an annual antidote to pessimism; for then arises the ardent cry, as faith and expectation are centered afresh on the living God:

*Rorate, cœli, desuper, et nubes plaunt Justum:  
 aperiatur terra, et germinet Salvatorem.*

<sup>4</sup> ii, 8 f.

(Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies  
pour down the Righteous One:  
Let the earth open, and let her bring forth the Saviour.)

## V

The ancient offices of Advent, however, it would seem, aimed to take the minds of the faithful back as effectively as possible to pre-Christian times. The contrast appears then as midnight to high noon; brilliant, indeed, with points of light and wonderful constellations, and with the waxing and waning moon, but still dark; though not without hope that some great light will leap into the sky to outshine all others. This note still sounds forth from the Christmas offices of the historic liturgy:

*Dies sanctificatus illuxit nobis: venite gentes, et adorate Dominum: quia hodie descendit lux magna super terram. Alleluia.*

(A hallowed day hath dawned for us: come ye Gentiles and adore the Lord; for this day a great light hath descended upon the earth. Alleluia.)

When Pandora, the first woman according to the Greeks, opened through insatiable curiosity the fateful box and let loose all manner of ills to be blown about the world like dandelion down, she shut down the lid just in time to retain hope. Among Gentiles this precious thing only gleamed; it never became incandescent. With those more or less imbued with



Platonic philosophy, it could scarcely be otherwise. To such it seemed more natural to think of the Divine coming to mankind along the mystical route of Ideas and Reason, or, as under the leading of Love, they should pass, in Plato's exquisite language, from "the beauties of earth to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions they arrived at the notion of absolute Beauty, and at last knew what the essence of Beauty is." With the many who looked in one way and another for the return of the Golden Age, hope was fond, faint and fireless; rising in Virgil's Saturnian strains in the *Fourth Eclogue* to unparalleled charm. The following portion is from the rendering by John Dryden:

The last great Age, foretold by sacred Rimes,  
Renews its finished course; Saturnian times  
Roll round again; and mighty years, begun  
From their first Orb, in radiant circles run.  
The base degenerate iron Offspring ends;  
A golden progeny from Heaven descends.  
O chaste *Lucina*! speed the Mother's pains,  
And haste the glorious Birth! thy own *Apollo* reigns!  
The lovely Boy, with his auspicious face,  
Shall *Pollio's* consulship and triumph grace.  
Majestic months set out with him to their appointed Race.  
The Father banish'd virtue shall restore,  
And crimes shall threat the guilty World no more.  
The Son shall lead the life of Gods, and be  
By Gods and Heroes seen, and Gods and Heroes see.

The jarring Nations he in peace shall bind,  
And with paternal virtues rule Mankind.  
Unbidden Earth shall wreathing Ivy bring  
And fragrant Herbs (the promises of Spring)  
As her first offerings to her infant King.

With this *Bucolic* in mind, written, doubtless, with the expected child of Octavian in mind, one can understand how a Spanish legend arose to say that "the eyes of Virgil were the first to see the Star of Bethlehem." It was as easy to relate this poet's *Eclogue* to Christ as many a word of Hebrew prophet.

Only, however, among Jews, the custodians of the Oracles of God, did expectation glow to white heat; causing them betimes to lift voices to heaven almost choking with emotion and crying: "O Lord, how long!" This was due to their unshakable faith in a transcendent Deity, who, never confused with the operations of Nature, remained sovereign and free to create things anew: to their profound conviction of the God-givenness of religion whose donations came by way of history and through human personality: to their unconquerable belief, fostered by many a stirring word of psalmist and prophet, that human life on this planet owed its origin to God and would yet find, however long delayed, a sure goal of justice in and through Him: and to their exalting sense of national consecration to the service of the Most High.

Since it belongs to the very nature of a lively hope to forecast, some in Jewry comforted their waiting hearts by envisaging a warrior Messiah who should come, like a thief in the night, to defeat the enemies of God and His people, set up His throne in Jerusalem and from thence rule the world in equity and peace. Others, again, all too sadly certain that no mere son of David could possibly cope with the gigantic task of world regeneration, centered hope in a semi-divine being who should suddenly appear on the clouds of heaven to sweep away all evil by one burning, blasting stroke of irresistible power, as the prelude to the Kingdom of God, indescribable in beauty and perfection, coming straight down from the skies on to a rejuvenated earth.

## VI

In the fulness of the times the desire of all nations came; but in how different a manner from general Jewish expectation:

They were all looking for a king,  
To slay their foes and lift them high;  
Thou cam'st, a little baby thing  
That made a woman cry.

The Infinite and Eternal God came to visit mankind in great humility. He deigned to be born of a poor woman in a rude cattle trough. Truly a most inaus-

picious beginning for a process of world regeneration! Yet no; for thus began the religion of the Incarnation, which teaches, its genius being anti-catastrophic, a redemption of all life from the cradle to the grave, and of the whole social context in which it is set, by the gradual interpenetration of the finite by the Infinite. This conception of Christianity, however, is hardly for the Micawber mind, whether with upturned, horizontal, or downcast gaze. It is one for brave hearts and daring minds who decree to live

With upturned eye while the hand is busy.

Much sound philosophy for this or any day is contained in the conversation wherein one Scot in hopeless mood exclaimed to another: "God help us!" and was met with the instant reply: "Aye, Donald, but we must help Him!" Mankind, with all its faults and failings, has extricated itself from appalling abysses in the past and can do so again. Let but goodwill, faith, hope and charity prevail, and the race may move far toward that richer, truer state of life of which prophets have spoken, and poets have sung, and for which Christ lived and died among men. If, during the past century, but half the creative thought directed toward the study and conquest of the physical world, whose fruits have tended to

breed little but chaos and despair, had been devoted to the spiritual universe and to the diviner possibilities of life therefrom, the world ere now had been within sight of the towers of the City of God.

The paradox involved in Bethlehem is brought out with dramatic effect in what has been called "the lovely sequence of Masses," three in all, with which the historic Church of the West has ushered in Christmas for over six hundred years. The spirit that informs them is far removed from Plato's ladder, to which reference has been made. It would be difficult to find words more apt in this connection—the liturgical approach of the Latin Communion to Bethlehem and beyond—than these of Evelyn Underhill from her stimulating work, *Man and the Supernatural*:

As the faithful draw nearer and nearer to the full Divine manifestation, so they draw nearer and nearer to the simplest human things. Where Plato declared "the true order of going" to be a mounting up by means of the beauties of earth, step by step towards the unearthly and Celestial Beauty; the Christian Church—strong in her possession of the Divine paradox—compels her children to take the opposite route. She declares the true movement of the religious consciousness to be inwards, not outwards. It moves from the abstract and adoring sense of God transcendent to the homely discovery of His revelation right down in history, in humblest surroundings and most simple and concrete ways: bringing the adoring soul from



the utmost confines of thought—*la forma universal di questo nodo*—to kneel before a poor person's baby born under the most unfortunate circumstances.

This is what broke down the proud, stubborn, pharasaical heart of St. Paul; though his vision came through the Cross. Compared with this soul-subduing fact of God entering into the midst of human sin and suffering, his former faith, likewise the wisdom of this world, seemed foolishness. Instead of having "to ascend on bleeding hands and knees the Ladder of the Law"; instead of having to scale the mystical stairway of the Platonic Eros—to God; in unutterable love and Grace, God Himself came down to man. *He humbled Himself!* This is what haunted the imagination of the apostle and made him the tireless missionary of a Gospel of which he was never ashamed:

That Glory's self should serve our griefs and fears,  
And free Eternity submit to years.

In this Gospel of gracious completeness lies preserved all the Divine initiative of Hebrew thought, canonical and extra-canonical. Plato's ladder becomes, as it were, the loving, redeeming arms of God reaching down to earth. And that hesitancy of Aristotle, to which Robert Bridges alludes, is completely overcome:



where his book saith <sup>5</sup>  
that ther can be no friendship betwixt God and man  
because of their unlimited disparity.

From this dilemma of pagan thought, this poison of  
faith,  
Man-soul made glad escape in the worship of Christ;  
for his humanity is God's Personality,  
and communion with him is the life of the soul.

Thus the wonder of Bethlehem has been the enr-  
thralling theme of the historic book of Christmas,  
the golden chain that has linked one generation of  
Nativity pilgrims to another and all to an open, gra-  
cious heaven. But for the great revealing and trans-  
forming fact on which the story of the manger rests,  
no legends would ever have been woven by devout  
and loving minds, no pictures painted by skillful and  
reverent hands, no solemn hymns chanted and happy  
carols sung by adoring and rejoicing hearts.

Of all who have essayed to express in verse the  
paradox of the Incarnation, the utter humility of God  
at Bethlehem, Richard Crashaw, if equalled, has not  
been surpassed. Reference may be made, not to his  
gorgeous poem—*Satan's Sight of the Nativity*—but  
to one more simple and direct:

Welcome, all wonders in one sight!  
Eternity shut in a span!

<sup>5</sup> *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. viii, 7. 5.

Summer in Winter, Day in Night,  
 Heaven in Earth and God in man!  
*Great, little One! Whose all-embracing birth*  
*Lifts Earth to Heaven, stoops Heaven to Earth!*

To do it honor the merry, merry Christmas Bells were tolled by willing hands and feet. Through the midnight air their sonorous message went forth—*Nunc gaudet ecclesia!* (Now the Church rejoices!) Praise might find expression in the silent rhythms of the soul, or in the strains of vocal and instrumental music, now plainsong, again folktune, or both—all one; the theme is ever the same:

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour; for He that is mighty hath done great things; and holy is his name.

THANKS BE UNTO GOD FOR HIS UNSPEAKABLE GIFT! °

° *St. Luke i, 46 f. II Corinthians ix, 15.*



THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

*ADESTE fideles,  
Læti triumphantes,  
Venite, venite in Bethlehem;  
Natum videte,  
Regem angelorum,  
Venite, adoremus Dominum.*

(O come, all ye faithful . . .)

*The saint as the sinner—  
let this one and that come—  
for all that is human  
the "pax vobiscum."*

From *The Bells*, HUMBERT WOLFE.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

#### I

THE decree of Augustus had gone forth that all the world should be taxed. As this necessitated that every man should repair to the place from which he originally came, in order to be registered according to his ancestry, it is written:

And all went to enrol themselves, every man to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David; to enrol himself with Mary, who was betrothed to him, being great with child.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever else is unhistorical in the Nativity Idylls, this item would seem to possess all the marks of genuineness:

And she brought forth her firstborn son; and she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

It is extremely difficult to think of anyone bent on creating a mere story bringing his hero to birth in

<sup>1</sup> *St. Luke* ii, 3 ff.



this manner. Virgil, in his *Fourth Eclogue*, housing his child of hope in the imperial palace more nearly represents how an ancient master of romance would have dealt with the advent of a world saviour.

## II

Over this fifty-mile journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem the Christian mind and imagination in all generations has delighted to linger with the fondest interest and reverence.

To the medieval playwright, as may be well imagined, it offered altogether too tempting a theme to be passed by; so in a Coventry Mystery, *The Birth of Christ*, it has an important place. Only, however, when the pilgrims are made to appear at Bethlehem does the writer really enter into the pathos of the situation. How very quaint and even humorous is the whole description, yet how true to the spirit of the Gospel story. In the desire for realism the ancient dramatist not infrequently exceeded the bounds of strict reverence, especially in dealing with Joseph. But in this instance the climax demanded, and did not fail to produce, an affectionate solicitude on his part. The difficulties the holy pair meet with are such as any couple might have encountered on entering a crowded shrine village in medieval times during the visiting season. On the outskirts of the town

Joseph accosts a man whom he supposes to be a native and inquires of him where a place of shelter may be found:

ffor trewly this woman is fful werë,  
and fayn at reste, sere, wold she be.

The citizen is unable to afford them any comfort; for the "cetë is besett with pepyl." Even the streets are full and a place there could scarcely be had "with-owte debate."

Nay, serè, debate that wyl I nowthe;  
Alle suche thyngs passyn my powere:  
But yitt my care and alle my thought  
Is for Mary, my derlynge dere.

A! swete wyff, wat xal we do?  
Wher xal we logge this nyght?  
Onto the ffadyr of heffne pray we so,  
Us to keep ffrom every wykkd whyt.

The stranger moved to sympathy offers a suggestion:

Good man, o word I wyl the sey,  
If thou wylt do by the counsel of me;  
Yondyr is an hous of haras <sup>2</sup> that stant be the wey,  
Amonge the bestys herboryd may ye be.

Mary, who all the while has said nothing, suddenly breaks in:

Go we hens, husbond, for now tym it is . . .

<sup>2</sup> *Housy of haras*, stable.

These presentations, though given in the summer-time, were not absent from thought at the Nativity season; and they played their part in bringing home Christmas.

In the ancient Church in England nine days were allotted to the pilgrimage of Joseph and Mary to the hill country of Judæa; hence the application of the term *novena* to the season from the 16th to the 25th of December, the first date marking the beginning of Christ-tide, according to the old "Sarum use." In the naïve simplicity of their faith plain people in the Middle Ages walked in thought with the holy pilgrims from Nazareth to Bethlehem, as if it were all taking place for the first time. Here and there they might be aided by the *Waits*, otherwise styled *Wasters*, that is, wanderers, who in imagination entered tunefully and joyfully into the eventful journey, as did Calabrian shepherds with their bagpipes under other skies. The following portion of an old English carol has the pilgrimage in mind and may serve to indicate the kindly thoughts and sentiments which people of old were wont to cast around it.

As Joseph was a-walking  
He heard an angel sing:—  
"This night shall be born  
Our heavenly King;  
"He neither shall be born  
In housen nor in hall,

Nor in the place of Paradise,  
But in an ox's stall;

"He neither shall be clothed  
In purple nor in pall,  
But all in fair linen  
As were babies all.

"He neither shall be rocked  
In silver nor in gold,  
But in a wooden cradle  
That rocks on the mould.

"He neither shall be christened  
In white wine or red,  
But with fair spring water  
With which we were christenèd."

Meanwhile a more solemn approach was being made day by day in abbey and church by means of the offices of the great Latin liturgies. Should anyone really desire to enter into the meaning and significance of Christmas in its deeply spiritual sense, he will not find what he is seeking half so much in "Christmas Numbers" of one sort and another, nor in collections of Nativity verse and prose, valuable as these may be, as he will in the accumulated devotional treasures of the ancient liturgies, especially the Breviary; provided, of course, he is prepared to adjust himself to the quieter and "longer focus of metaphysical and religious contemplation" which the exercise will require. Clement A. Miles observes:

Whatever may be his attitude towards Catholicism, or, indeed, Christianity, no one sensitive to the music of words, or the suggestions of poetic imagery, can read the Roman Breviary and Missal without profound admiration for the amazing skill with which the noblest passages of Hebrew poetry are chosen and fitted to the expression of Christian devotion, and the gold of Psalmists, Prophets and Apostles is welded into coronals for the Lord and His saints. The office-books of the Roman Church are, in one aspect, the greatest of anthologies.

That types of thought and modes of devotion may appear, difficult perhaps for some to follow, will not distress those who are seeking gold and finding it in abundance, seven-times refined, and are concerned to know the truth that lies behind all symbols of ritual and doctrine. Liturgies, it is true, are all books of common prayer. They are primarily designed to preclude callow individualism: to subdue the minds and hearts of the worshipping assembly to unity of purpose: to create in all a common aim: and to inspire all to the attainment of a single goal. Still, they have their value as manuals of private devotion, even for those who have no more than an imaginative knowledge of their use in acts of corporate worship. If the ancient liturgies are viewed in all their length and breadth, especially as they set forth the Divine possibilities of personal religious experience, Advent symbolizes the awakening from sleep—the first stir-

rings of new life in the soul, leading on to the rise of the Day Star in the heart at Christmas and the entrance thereby upon the path that passes through the Lenten Purification to spiritual death and the resurrection life through Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> This, broadly interpreted, is simply the story of Dante again, and of the Gospels, especially St. John, from his "Come and see" to "Follow thou me."

He leads the sons thereof from state to state  
Of that Divine experience within  
Forth shadow'd once in holy, holy veils—  
The pageant of the life in Palestine.  
A Birth Divine, a hidden life in God,  
And then the witness of an outward call;  
The mystic passion, cross and death thereon;  
The resurrection and ascent in God:  
Herein stands forth the story of the soul,  
From that first moment which is second birth  
To that last stage ineffable when man  
Goes back to God.

The *Ember days* which immediately precede Christmas Eve, at the very name might suggest, have the same old pilgrimage of Joseph and Mary in mind. Even the Old Testament Scriptures used, whether by

<sup>3</sup> But only the expert can interpret the values of the Mass-liturgy. See *The Mystic Way*, chap. VI, Evelyn Underhill; *The Mass in Reasoned Prayers*, by Father W. Roche; also the works of A. E. Waite, especially *The Book of the Holy Graal*, from which the above excerpt is taken (XV), and his most recent and complete treatise, *The Holy Grail—Its Legends and Symbolism*.



design or not, seem especially full of the countryside through which the pilgrims are conceived to be travelling. With the passing of the weeks of Advent the longing expectancy becomes more and more intense—for the Christ is regarded as not yet come; rising into the "Great O's" which mark the seven days before Christmas Eve, one said or sung before the Song of the Blessed Virgin, commonly called the *Magnificat*. In these Antiphons from the *Breviary* the thrill of anticipation reaches its climax:

O WISDOM, that comest out of the Most High, that reachest from one end to another, and dost mightily and sweetly order all things: come, to teach us the way of Prudence!

O ADONAI, Who didst appear to Moses in the burning bush . . . come, to redeem us with an outstretched hand!

O ROOT OF JESSE . . . unto Whom the Gentiles seek: come, to deliver us, make no tarrying!

O KEY OF DAVID, and Sceptre of the House of Israel; that openest and no man shuttest; and shuttest and no man openeth: come, to bring out the prisoners from the prison!

O DAY-SPRING, Brightness of the Everlasting Light, Sun of Righteousness, come to give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death!

O KING OF THE GENTILES, yea, and Desire thereof . . . come, to save man, whom thou hast made of the dust of the earth!

O EMMANUEL, our King and our Law-Giver . . . come, to save us, O Lord our God!

Earnest supplicatory and intercessory prayer in the liturgies never misleads those who remember the mystical doctrine that underlies all true worship—"Our opening and His entrance are one act"; that the Holy Spirit is at once the inspiration of every heartfelt prayer and its gracious fulfilment. The body of all aspiring souls on earth, by whatever name, sign or creed, may be likened to that raised belt of water out in the open sea—"not much more than thirty feet high, though it covers hundreds of square miles, the particles changing, but the form never—a witness to the perpetual presence and force of the moon." The parable is plain. Beneath the attracting and holding power of the lunar orb, as if with continually outstretched arms in prayer, lies that sloping mass of water, which, by virtue of the planet's rotation, is seen and known as

The Moving waters at their priest-like task  
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores.

Ere the heart-stirring Antiphons have completely died away, Christmas Eve approaches. Now the note resounds: "This day ye shall know that the Lord will come and save us, and in the morning ye shall see His glory." And, again: "Stand ye still and ye shall see the wonders of the Lord." At last the faithful are come to Bethlehem to worship with the shepherds and to exult in the song of the angels:

*Gloria in altissimis Deo, et in terra pax  
hominibus bonæ voluntatis.\**

The moment of approach is intense and dramatic:

O ye shepherds, speak, and tell us what ye have seen:  
who is appeared in the earth?

We saw the new-born Child, and Angels singing praise  
to the Lord.

*Verse.* Speak; what have ye seen? And tell us of the  
Birth of Christ.

*Answer.* We saw the new-born Child, and Angels sing-  
ing praise to the Lord.

Christianity trembles into being (all is treated as a present reality) with a burst of heavenly song. Love and joy born of wonder at the opening heavens answers with a new canticle of praise, whose harmony derives from above. Now and for all time worship shall soar on the wings of melody, as above, so below. At the heart of the religion of the Incarnation lies music and poetry; because it is first of all a revelation: thus a call to worship, ere it is a Commission to life and activity. Then as the soft white light of dawn creeps over the eastern horizon, symbolical of the new light which now illumines the firmament of faith, adoration passes into the complete surrender of life to the purposes of God in Christ Jesus:

\* *St. Luke* ii, 14.

*Da nobis quæsumus omnipotens Deus: ut qui nova incarnati Verbi tui luce perfundimur; hoc in nostro resplendeat opere, quod per fidem fulget in mente.*

(Bathed in the new light brought upon earth by thine Incarnate Lord, we beseech Thee, O Almighty God, to vouchsafe that the holy faith which ever illumines our minds, may in all our actions shine forth to thy glory before the world.) <sup>5</sup>

### III

One of the lessons which Robert Browning teaches in his powerful poem, *Christmas Eve*, is, as it may be put, that Christmas charity should not expend itself entirely on material tokens of good-will, but run over somewhat into a kindly consideration for, and a feeling of kinship with, all who are in any way seeking to lay hold of the broad hem of the garment of Christ.

The speaker in the poem, who may or may not be Browning himself, feels that after all, perhaps, his place is in the Nonconformist bare-walled Mount Zion Chapel among the wrecks of humanity who gather there for worship—Christ's "little ones" who may not be despised with impunity. But when he is carried by the Lord in a vision to St. Peter's in Rome,

<sup>5</sup> With "We saw the new-born Child, and Angels," excerpts from the Breviary end. What follows has mainly to do with the three Masses alluded to on page 88. Niceties of order are not observed. Only a general impression is aimed at.

where, under that "miraculous Dome" of God, midnight Mass is being celebrated with due pomp and splendor, Christ enters the Basilica, because much love is being shown Him there. When, again, he is suddenly swept to the interior of the classroom of a German Professor who has just begun a lecture on Christ as a Myth, which winds up with the thought of Him as a Man, Christ stays through the discourse, because there also is love for Him, attenuated indeed, but still love. This, of course, is not the position of the speaker in the poem; for he nearly lost hold of Christ's garment while musing in a mood of mild indifferentism regarding all these varied appreciations of Him. It is, however, something like that of the Pope in *The Ring and the Book*, who while he may not enthusiastically affirm that the Divine self-sacrifice of love revealed in the Gospel story is in all respects absolute historic fact yet feels—tale or truth—the effect to be much the same:

so my heart be struck,  
What care I,—by God's gloved hand or the bare.

The central theme of the poem would seem to be, where love is, there is Christ, as William Blake has it:

Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,  
There God is dwelling too.

But for all that the Christ of Christmas Eve is no mere abstraction, no Person half-hidden in the mists of long ago. He is the Redeemer of such "broken-earthenware" as gathered in Mount Zion Chapel. And when the speaker in the poem, disgusted with the uncouth congregation he had chosen to tarry among that Christmas Eve, and supremely offended by "the pig-of-lead pressure of the preaching man's immense stupidity," flung out of the Meeting House, He was the One who brought him to his knees behind the chapel in humble and abject penitence for his pride and lack of charity. The picture has power in it:

The whole face turned upon me full.  
 And I spread myself beneath it,  
 As when the bleacher spreads to seethe it  
 In the cleansing sun, his wool,—  
 Steeps in the flood of noontide whiteness  
 Some defiled, discolored web—  
 So lay I, saturate with brightness.

Though not at the Christmas of 1849, the date of *Christmas Eve*, later, no doubt, Browning would have conceded more to "that idea which regards things of sense as made luminous by the spirit of which they are the ministers and envoys." In precisely this way, through representations of the original Nativity scene in numerous churches throughout



the world at Christmas time, many, very many, with poor vision for the most exquisite painting of the Madonna and Child, and poorer hearing for a rendering of Handel's *Messiah*, or even Pontifical Mass, are carried in blessing to Bethlehem, as they have been since the days of the Blessed Francis. It is often forgotten that a religious symbol need not be supremely and perfectly beautiful to be effective. All that is required is that there shall be "set going the necessary trains of association which arouse absolute feeling, and this can be done without any appeal to the æsthetic faculty; for the Holy, though manifested in the beautiful, can be found apart from it." That the crib creations of devout and loving hands have interpreted the sign of the manger far more effectively to many than any sermon of Meister Eckhart could possibly do would not be difficult to show. Let this delightful quatrain suffice:

O my deir hert, young Jesus sweit,  
Prepare Thy creddil in my spreit,  
And I shall rock Thee in my hert  
And never mair from Thee depart.

## IV

The road to Bethelhem, however, has been regarded as both short and long, easy and arduous to travel. It may be likened to one of those white

ribbons of concrete, often seen on the highway, which dips into a valley and rises abruptly to a hill-top in the distance, crested with trees, and seeming

like an invitation into space  
Boundless, a guide into eternity.

The Gospel of the Holy Nativity, like the whole historical life and ministry of Jesus, denotes the evangelical immanence of God, His condescension, His nearness, so full of love and hope for mankind; but His transcendence, aglow with luminous mystery because of the Incarnation, makes the Infinite background. Thither through Bethlehem and on by the Mounts of Transfiguration, Travail and Triumph, the great ones in the Kingdom of God have made their mystical pilgrimage; sometimes like Dante

On wings that navigate cerulean skies.

Not everyone is able to follow them in this life the whole distance of the way that leads the soul back to the heart of God from whence it came. Yet such aspiring men and women beget in many a just pride in the human species at its highest and best, which easily passes into worship; for they are the heroes of the soul, conquerors in the realm of the spirit, poets and pioneers of the Spiritual City:

Who, rowing hard against the stream,  
Saw distant gates of Eden gleam,  
And did not dream it was a dream.

Servants of the Supernatural, their feet on the earth and their souls in the Unseen, they make God and Eternity real; also the mysteries of Christ through which they moved. It need never be difficult to put to the proof the observation of Evelyn Underhill: "All the studies of mystical psychology ever written will give us less information here than one encounter with a contemplative saint." These words are from *The Golden Sequence* and to not a few this rare book will be thought to possess no little of both these values. To much the same effect writes Arthur Edward Waite: "Those who will be at pains to read them [the mystics] will not, I think, look up from their pages without an overflowing conviction that, far removed from ordinary paths and interests, even in the domain of psychology, there is a grand experiment possible, and that some have achieved it." The tones in a St. Augustine, a St. Teresa, a Father Baker, are abundantly varied; but the divine accent is unmistakable. Sometimes the encounter with them works an instant inward revolution, as in the case of William Law, when, at the age of forty-six, "he came across the writings of the seer, Jacob Boehme, who set his whole nature aglow with spiritual fervor,

so that when he first read his works they put him in a 'perfect sweat.' " Much was attained by the great mystics, because they paid the price; so necessary to overcome the inherent downward drag in human nature; to cure the inveterate tendency of the soul to coil up, grimalkin-like, on the genial hearth of a comfortable Christianity; and to surmount in Maeterlinck's phrase, "the hereditary resignation with which we tarry in the gloomy prison of the senses." Theirs was the

Infinite passion and the pain  
Of finite hearts that yearn.

With St. John of the Cross more particularly in mind, E. I. Watkin has written what, no doubt, has found an echo in many hearts as they also have contemplated in silent wonder the superhuman courage of the alpine spirits of other days:

By study of the mystics I have learned of the beauty of this divine way to God, but I have learned also of its pain. The mystic, wearied with toil and scorched with heat, is climbing Mount Nebo with Moses to die with him on the summit of vision. I linger in a comfortable hotel at Sittim, with a magnificent view of the Hills of Moab and a shady corner of garden under the palms. There I sit in sight of the Holy Mountain, its steep ascent of crags, its summit red in the rays of the sun. From the Mountain of God I cannot turn away my eyes. But I dare not leave the garden. Yonder peak every soul must climb

to see God. For this Mountain is also the Mount of Purgatory. The mystic makes the ascent in this life. Blessed is he. He and he alone sees the vision. But the price is mortal pain. As each is called, each must choose his response.

One may well believe that the mystical union and experience is "the blossoming of Christianity, the epiphany of supernatural life," while yet confessing that in more humble ways—in the solemn hours of birth and death, when the marriage bells are ringing, in the sweet faces of little children, before the green Book of Nature in the springtime, on a moonlit sea far out from shore, and at the sight, touch and taste of consecrated things, the presence of God may be most graciously known and felt. And assuredly a multitude no man can number have found God in Christ Jesus, even at Bethlehem. Thither they have gone, as well as to the foot of the Cross, to bend in adoring wonder before the infinite mystery of Incarnate love and mercy and have prayed again, if not for the first time, in expressive words like these from an ancient Responsary:

*Quem cum amavero, casta sum,  
Cum tetigero, munda sunt,  
Cum accepero, virgo sum!*

(If I love Him, I shall be clean;  
If I touch Him, I shall be refined;  
If I embrace Him, I shall be spotless!)

THE END OF THE PILGRIMAGE



*Declare to us, bright star, if we shall seek  
Him in the morning's blushing cheek,  
Or search the bed of spices through,  
To find Him out?*

*Star—*

*No, this ye need not do;  
But only come and see Him rest,  
A Princely Babe, in's Mother's breast.*

ROBERT HERRICK, *The Star Song.*

## CHAPTER VI

### THE END OF THE PILGRIMAGE

#### I

WHEN Christmas began and ended in times past was never a matter to be too carefully defined; for the seasons of the Christian Year blended into each other, as they still do, like the colors of the rainbow. By Candlemas, however, originally called the *Meeting* and later *Presentation* and *Purification*, whose date is February 2, the Nativity Feast, together with its brilliant afterglow, had nearly passed away; for then people thought what one has aptly said: "We are burning the last lights of the Festival of Christmas before we enter the wilderness of Lent." But in this observance the hillsides of Judæa are forsaken for the courts of the temple in Jerusalem. The Christ Child is still the center of interest; but He is now in the arms of the aged Simeon, who sings over Him his *Nunc Dimittis* and makes the significant prophecy—which so well describes what the mission of personal Christianity has been in the world, that

the pure image of Jesus, when it shall have become the possession of all mankind, will teach them "more of their own hearts than all the ancient aphorisms of self-knowledge."

## II

With the Coming of the Magi to Bethlehem imagination still hovers around the manger; and their advent forms the crowning touch in the Idylls of Bethlehem. As an event it has long been associated with the Epiphany Festival, January 6, the Twelfth Night of other times.

Magi in the Persian tongue signifies wise men. In the ancient liturgies, due to suggestions taken over from the Old Testament, they became royal personages. Mrs. Jameson in her *Legends of the Madonna*, forgetting for the moment that Plato's dream occasionally came true, remarks: "We are not to be offended at the assertion that they were at once princes and wise men!" By the Middle Ages they have completely emerged from the mists. They are now real kings, concerning whom much is known, the conflicting nature of the information only adding to the general and local interest in them. They have also definite names, which in the long measured syllables of the Italian—*Gasparre, Melchiorre, Baldassarre*—match well the slow tread of the solemn

dignitaries from the East they denominated. The first is the monarch of Tarsus, three-score years and ten, with white flowing beard; the second is the ruler of Arabia, middle-aged, also bearded, but showing no touch of grey; the third is the king of Saba, or Ethiopia, young, smooth-faced and frequently represented as a negro. While the carol writers, for the most part, seemed especially drawn to the Mother and the Child, the angels and the shepherds, the artists in every generation succumbed to the spell of this remarkable incident. With their representations in mind, Clement A. Miles writes:

We picture Oriental monarchs in robes mysteriously gorgeous, wrought with strange patterns, heavy with gold and precious stones, with slow processional motion they advance, bearing to the King of Kings their symbolic gifts, gold for His crowning, incense for His worship, myrrh for His mortality, and with them come the mystery, color, and perfume of the East, the occult wisdom which bows itself before the revelation in the Child.

Under the conviction that the Gospel story contained a possible core of truth many have wondered much concerning the Star of Bethlehem. It could not, we may be sure, have been a comet which the Wise Men saw and followed. While to moderns this is one of the most beautiful of celestial objects, streaming

Like a proud banner in the train of night,  
Th' emblazoned flag of Deity——

to ancients it was uniformly regarded as a messenger of Divine displeasure, portending all manner of evil and distress to mankind, to nature and to animals. With a peculiarly intimate acquaintance with the probable background, James Hope Moulton suggests a *Nova*, similar to the one which burst forth with sudden splendor "in Perseus in February, 1901." Assuming the Magi were familiar with Jewish hopes of a Messiah, which in a manner would be seen to resemble their own expectation of Saoshyant, and had had a dream which led to their identification, they may be pictured in the imagination setting out with eagerness and haste on their eventful journey westward.

It is astonishing how simple and unadorned, yet withal beautiful, the story of St. Matthew is when looked at closely. There is, strangely enough, no clear indication in his narrative that there were three persons. Only the trinity of gifts offered at the manger enables the reader to make this inference. The East out of which they came is also wholly undefined. As to whether they were young or old, of royal or lesser degree, are matters which are likewise left unsaid. As nameless wizards, they suddenly appear at the court of Herod like ships emerging

out of the fog. Through observation of the heavenly bodies, it is alone evident, they had been led to go forth in search of a King, whose birth they believed had universal significance, bearing with them suitable gifts. Nor did they know all the way they would have to travel, or even what they would find at the end of their pilgrimage. In this respect, of course, they but resemble all pioneers of faith from the days of Abraham to Christ and after, to whom, no matter from what narrow or vicious circles they may have broken away, no maps or charts have ever been given—only a star to guide the footsteps. It is in this connection that a dark saying, perhaps one of Oliver Cromwell's, begins to sparkle with meaning: "The man who goes farthest is the man who does not know where he is going." But he is certain that Someone else does. Then when all was over at Bethlehem the Wise Men departed by *another way*—a phrase that has caught the fancy of the mystically minded; for they have said concerning it that no way could ever be the same again to men who had once looked upon the King in His beauty.

### III

The story of the Magi may be taken as symbolizing the greatest of all human quests, the quest for God. The Star of Bethlehem thus becomes a mystical



one, a *Nova* indeed, which first descended into man's "glooming heart" at that time when

With arms uncouth, with knees that scarce could kneel,  
Upraised his speechless ultimate appeal. . . .  
And some strange light, past knowledge, past control,  
Rose in his eyes, and shone, and was a soul.

The inner urge to seek, if haply he might find, the inscrutable Power that lurked behind the veil of sense, has been in all ages man's overmastering interest. This is the one thing that most sharply separates him from his fellows in the animal kingdom, with whom, in so many other respects, he has so much in common. Of the many strange things this planet offers for consideration, the strangest is surely that a certain kind of mammal should have been thus inwardly moved, and should have been able, as he has consistently believed, to grasp in some measure the lineaments of the Unseen, as a variety of sacred literatures reveal. In a mood of unusual sympathy, George Eliot writes:

the earth yields nothing more Divine  
Than high prophetic vision—than the Seer  
Who fasting from man's meaner joy beholds  
The paths of beauteous order, and constructs  
A fairer type to shame our low content.

This is the story of the rise of religion under many skies; and, as has often been observed, no satisfactory

explanation has ever been given why or how this should come to pass "if the world principle is in its essence absolutely indifferent to distinctions of value." For a long time learned astronomers knew that "Uranus was not moving exactly in the path, and at the velocity, assigned by calculation, even after every known perturbing element had been taken into account." Some unknown and unseen factor must therefore be the cause of its mysterious movements. On the 23rd of September, 1846, all was made plain, when, following the directions of M. Leverrier, the planet Neptune was discovered by directing the telescope toward a certain point in the constellation Aquarius. In *Pauline*, the youthful Browning wrote:

I cannot chain my soul: it will not rest  
 In its clay prison, this most narrow sphere:  
 It has strange impulse, tendency, desire,  
 Which nowise I account for nor explain,  
 But cannot stifle . . . they live  
 Referring to some state of life unknown.

The deep, deep desire of the human heart, as was said of Coleridge, for better bread than can be made with wheat, for a higher than created good, is only understood when seen in conjunction with the sublime mystery of God. Discoursing on the words of Job—"Oh, that I knew where I might find Him,"

and having in mind some who were proclaiming their inability to find God anywhere, Professor William Knight once wrote:

We miss, however, some of the peculiar sorrow to which this experience so often gave rise of old. The extreme pain, which this ancient seeker after light endured, is in marked contrast to the contentment and acquiescence of the modern mind before *its* conscious blank of experience.

Yet there is a deep truth in the old legend which describes a band of pilgrims sitting on the seashore confessing to one another the losses they have sustained in life. There were visions of vanished gold, of faded honors, of false friends, of loved ones lost and gone; but they all agreed with him who spoke last:

Sad losses ye have met  
But mine is sadder yet,  
For the believing heart has gone from me.

It can hardly be otherwise; for the inevitable discord and sadness, consequent upon unfaith, is but the clashing of the soul with its own deepest principle. Many centuries ago St. Augustine wrote what may be conceded long before any particular preference is struck for one or other of the many available systems of religion:

*Quia fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum,  
donec requiescat in te.*

(For thou hast created us for Thyself, and our heart cannot be quieted until it may find repose in Thee.)

## IV

The Magi from the East, deeply spiritual and religious men, still seeking and eventually finding, may also be thought of as typical at once of the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New. The characteristic mood of the first is that of waiting, longing, hoping and scanning, betimes, the firmament of faith. God has not yet revealed Himself in all His gracious fulness; but he most surely will do so. What *that day* will disclose exercises their most reverent thought and imagination. Now the glory which shall be revealed seems like a Messiah who shall be greater than David; again it is a new covenant which shall be written, not on stone, but on the fleshly tables of the heart. Sometimes there are forecasts of a wondrous outpouring of the Spirit; then vision discerns a marvellous kingdom in which all shall know the Lord from the least to the greatest, both within and without the borders of Israel.

The spirit of the New Testament is entirely different. Apostles are no longer waiting for God. He has come! In the epiphany of supernatural holiness, love and truth in the Son of Man all longing is swal-

lowed up. Their minds are at rest. We have peace! The soul has arrived, so to speak, at the end of the pilgrimage and owns a wondrous satisfaction in the likeness of God manifest in the face of Jesus Christ. In the satisfaction, too, because of His infinite "preciousness," there is a thrill and a joy: "O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!" <sup>1</sup> Hence no name was too great, no language too glowing, for apostles to ascribe to Him who brought God to men in the plenitude of His grace and power; making them ready, on the one hand, to be poured out on the altar of sacrificial life and service, and, on the other, to rise through Him into the life that was life indeed.

There is an interesting legend which describes the Magi on their arrival at Bethlehem going in to see the Christ Child one at a time. The eldest proceeded first and found to his astonishment an old person who discoursed to him in the tones of ripest wisdom. When in turn the middle-aged man entered he found to his amazement a teacher of his own years of profound and comprehensive mind. Last of all the youngest went in and was received by a youthful prophet in whose eyes burned the divine fire. Outside they compared their experiences and marvelled greatly at what they had severally found. Then tak-

<sup>1</sup> *Romans* xi, 33.

ing their gifts in their hands, they went in together, and, behold, before them lay the Christ Child as He actually was, a Babe of twelve days!

In this manner people in bygone times were wont to express their belief that Christ met every state of life from youth to old age. But the legend contains a deeper truth, namely: that He is far more wonderful than any individual finding, or even the discernment of any age or generation. He is the exalted and glorified Lord of the early Eastern Church, the Rex tremendæ majestatis of medieval times, the crucified Redeemer of the Reformation, the humanitarian Jesus and the fiery apocalyptic Seer of more recent years—all these and more. By their deep earnestness and penetration, men, in the very act of revealing, have not infrequently limited the meaning of the Divine Master and what St. Paul called the "unsearchable riches of Christ." But the day has now come, many believe, when these great gifts of wisdom are being brought together and compared, in order to be jointly laid at His feet in the spirit of wonder and worship; and when this is done, He shall appear what He really is, no other than the Ineffable One of St. John—"God's presence and His very self and essence all divine." Thus runs a beautiful passage from *The Testament of Beauty*:



So it was when Jesus came in his gentleness  
with his divine compassion and great Gospel of Peace,  
men hail'd him WORD OF GOD, and in the title of Christ  
crown'd him with love beyond all earth-names of renown.

For He, wandering unarm'd save by the Spirit's flame,  
in few years with few friends founded a world-empire  
wider than Alexander's and more enduring;  
since from his death it took its everlasting life.  
HIS kingdom is God's kingdom, and his holy temple  
not in Athens or Rome, but in the heart of man.

In some strangely interesting lines, however,  
Robert Bridges has expressed himself regarding the  
reception which shall be accorded to the religion of  
Christ in the modern world:

He preach'd once to the herd, but now calleth the wise,  
and shall in his second Advent, that tarried long,  
be glorified by the Greeks that come to the feast.

By the herd is not meant the common country people  
who heard Jesus gladly during the days of His flesh.  
Nor does the poet mean their like in the present gen-  
eration; for their hearts are still sound, full of faith  
in, and love for, Christ and his divine message, both  
as it touches upon the daily round and the common  
face of Nature. The term most likely denotes the  
Jerusalem crowds; also, and more particularly, those  
in this materialistic age who are becoming "more  
and more dominated by animal instincts and dazed  
by modern discoveries and notions which they cannot  
digest" and so are unfitting themselves to "see" the

beauty of the mind of Christ and the wonder of the revelation of the Heavenly Father in Him. The Greeks, on the other hand, are the discerning descendants of those inquiring spirits, of whom a glimpse is caught in the pages of the Fourth Gospel, who came to one of the disciples and said, "Sir, we would see Jesus."<sup>2</sup> The position of the poet is thoroughly Johannine. It is a peculiar characteristic of St. John that he delights to portray the Master, not as one who went about calling upon men to repent, as is the case with the other Evangelists, but as Light who attracts and repels them, according as they are good or evil, and whose message is a definite challenge to their spiritual intelligence.<sup>3</sup> Not that the last note is entirely absent in the other Gospels. On the contrary, it is very definitely bound up with the parabolic teaching of Jesus: "He that hath ears to hear let him hear." The invitation of St. John is that of all mystics: "Come and see." The promise held out is, if one shall come, one shall see. An ever-expanding vision of God and goodness shall attend the confession: *Dominus illuminatio mea*.<sup>4</sup> What Robert Bridges, playing, as it were, the part of Philip in the modern world, would have all inquiring "Greeks" see who come to the feast—not necessarily

<sup>2</sup> *St. John* xii, 21.

<sup>3</sup> *St. John* iii, 19-22; viii, 31; ix, 39-41; xiv, 17; xvi, 13. See *The Incarnate Glory*, William Manson, p. 24 and chap. V.

<sup>4</sup> *Psalm* xxvii, 1.

those who know that language and culture—is succinctly set forth in these lines, which the whole *Testament* will be found to amplify in a manner “beyond compare”:

God so loveth the world . . .  
and in the fellowship of the friendship of Christ  
God is seen as the very self-essence of love,  
Creator and mover of all as activ Lover of all,  
self-express'd in not-self, without which no self were.  
In thought whereof is neither beginning nor end  
nor space nor time; nor any fault nor gap therein  
'twixt self and not-self, mind and body, mother and child,  
'twixt lover and loved, God and man: but ONE ETERNAL  
in the love of Beauty and in the selfhood of Love.

There is a certain similarity between these noble words and some of William Blake when properly understood:

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:  
Bring me my Arrows of desire:  
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!  
Bring me my Chariot of fire.

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall the sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green & pleasant land.

In his choice *Introduction* to a new edition of *Poems of Blake*, Laurence Binyon makes it very clear that this is in no sense a battle hymn of Socialism. Jeru-

Jerusalem in the poet's thought does not mean that perfectly conceived and planned city of clean streets, beautiful parks and poverty completely abolished, present to the vision of the social reformer, whether secular or Christian. Not, of course, that Blake was ever insensible to human need. Far from it. One has only to think of *Holy Thursday* among his *Songs of Experience*:

Is this a holy thing to see  
In a rich and fruitful land,  
Babes reduc'd to misery,  
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song?  
Can it be a song of joy?  
And so many children poor?  
It is a land of poverty!

And their sun does never shine,  
And their fields are bleak & bare,  
And their ways are fill'd with thorns:  
It is eternal winter there.

For where-e'er the sun does shine,  
And where-e'er the rain does fall,  
Babe can never hunger there,  
Nor poverty the mind appall.

Jerusalem, however, is a city of the mind, of the imagination, whose inhabitants, be it noted, are all artists! To William Blake, the Lord Jesus Christ

and His apostles, belonged to this order; hence he roundly declares: "A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Artist, an Architect: the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian." This, of course, will sound a strange doctrine to those who are prone to look upon art as "a mere by-play or relaxation from the serious business of life," instead of its essential and divinely ordained spirit, nowhere exemplified so perfectly as in Jesus of Nazareth who dedicated his marvellous gifts of mind and heart and soul to no selfish end whatsoever, but to selfless giving, even unto death. Mr. Binyon remarks:

Conceive a world in which everyone worked in the spirit of the artist; that is to say, doing what he had to do as perfectly as he possibly could, finding in that his pleasure, and thinking nothing of gain. Would not such a world be infinitely better than the one we know? Isn't it one of the most tragic things in life that men and women, surrounded by miraculous beauties in earth and air and sky, go through life scarcely heeding them, getting no joy from them, immersed in the dullness of cares and calculations, in quarrels, jealousies, ambitions?

For that day when all the Lord's people will be artists, and for any now, established "in the love of beauty and in the selfhood of love," and consecrated to the concretion of the beautiful, the good and the true in things and persons, Robert Bridges has written the "fitting act of daily devotion":

I love all beauteous things,  
 I seek and adore them;  
 God hath no better praise,  
 And man in his hasty days  
 Is honored for them.

*I too will something make  
 And joy in the making. . . .*

## V

Ancient Art, and also modern, sensing what is, doubtless, the deepest spirit in the Gospel story, have treated the appearance of the Magi at Bethlehem as a kind of prophecy of the triumph of Christ in the world at large. Thus the Nativity Idylls link themselves with the weird Book of Revelation. Taken as a whole the Holy Scriptures may be viewed in this sequence. The Old Testament, though valuable in itself as religious literature, sets forth to the Christian the preparation for the supreme gift of God to mankind; the Gospels portray that gift in the terms of the life of Jesus of Nazareth; and the apostolic writings interpret it to men out of living experience. The Apocalypse stands alone. It adds nothing new to either Gospels or Epistles on the essential values of the Christian revelation; and to do so is not apparently its purpose. It seems almost entirely taken up with the question whether or no the religion of Christ shall triumph in a world hostile and indiffer-



ent to its message and mode of life; and the answer, given with a riotous fury of imagination, is in the affirmative. The Bethlehem narratives are also full of prophetic confidence; though to turn to them from the Book of Revelation is like passing from the tangled thicket of some dense forest into a place of pastoral repose. Yet the theme is much the same. The Babe on the Mother's knee is the King of Kings and great triumphs are coming to Him. In Mary and Joseph the home and family are represented, in the shepherds the toiling masses of mankind, and in the Magi man at his best in intellect and culture. All are grouped around the young Prince of glory at whose feet the costliest and best are being laid in the spirit of reverent homage. Legend early placed the ox and the ass in the picture; for they, too, were to share in the new mission of love and mercy. Nor could the medieval playwright endure the thought that no young person was represented at Bethlehem; hence he created Madelon to accompany the shepherds, whose weeping in the snow because she had no gift made an angel take pity on her and cause roses to spring up miraculously at her feet, so that she might have something to offer the Babe in token of her devotion. It has always been difficult to keep the scene from growing; for there was the great commission of the Risen Lord to His disciples and the

consequent vision of the summing up of all things in Him.

## VI

Since those far-off days, however, Christianity has become in a unique sense the religion of the Western World. Some are not so sure now that it can be made, or should be made, the religion of all mankind. Other races, writes Ernest Troeltsch, "living under entirely different cultural conditions may experience their contact with the Divine Life in quite a different way." This would, of course, call for a new measure of charity from not a few in Christendom; "but to apprehend the One in the Many," we are reminded, "constitutes the special character of love." As for the peoples of Europe and America, they cannot but endorse Christianity; for it is inextricably bound up with all they have been and are; hence "God's countenance revealed to us, very Truth and Life." A small but important change would thus be necessary in the well-known lines of Mrs. Hamilton King:

For God has other words for other worlds,  
But for this (Western) world the Word of God is Christ.

If this should be the outlook, one can well imagine that the Western World might only clasp the more

tightly to its breast that which is then its own peculiar possession. Yet this would be the case, not just because "we cannot do without a religion, and the only one we can endure is Christianity"; but because there seems to be a wondrous fullness and a fascinating finality exemplified in its Founder—perfect devotion to God and complete devotion to man—than which nothing higher seems conceivable to creatures on this earth, or more effective as an "apperceiving mass," gathered all the way from the crib to the cross, wherewith to apprehend life's ultimate meaning and the nature of the Invisible and Eternal God; and also for the reason that it possesses that for which the modern world is crying aloud—the gift of peace and brotherhood.

But the Christian Church as a whole is hardly likely to relinquish its deep-seated hope in a world brought more and more under the benign dominion of Christ. In His Empire, however, the peoples of the world shall increasingly be made to feel "that the treasures of their ancient faiths will not be cast away as dross;" but may be "brought to Him who prizes, more than we can understand, every effort of the human mind to grope its way toward the Kingdom of God," for these are the fruits of that light which lighteth every man coming into the world.

All souls that struggle and aspire,  
All hearts of prayer by Thee are lit.

Nor will the Christian Church cease to believe and to labor accordingly that the triumph of the religion of the Incarnation in the world is yet for the appointed time and though it tarry it will not delay; that in the long providence of God, as G. K. Chesterton has written:

To an open house in the evening  
Home shall men come,  
To an older place than Eden  
And a taller town than Rome.  
To the end of the way of the wandering star,  
To the things that cannot be and that are,  
To the place where God was homeless  
And all men are at home.



THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM



*Follow you the Star that lights a desert  
pathway, yours or mine.  
Forward, till you see the highest Human  
Nature is Divine.*

TENNYSON, *Locksley Hall, Sixty Years  
After.*

*May joy come from God above,  
To all those who Christmas love!  
Anglo-Norman Carol.*

## CHAPTER VII

### THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

#### I

ONE of the most beautiful Nativity legends tells how the Star of Bethlehem fell to the ground in a myriad pieces. The morning after the Magi departed, Joseph rose early, before it was yet dawn, and went outside. As he looked about, "it seemed to him as if the sky itself had fallen to the earth, or was reflected on the ground, for all around him as he stood, there grew a million little flowers, like twinkling silver stars."

No fancy has been dearer to poets than the likeness of stars to flowers; although in reality there is none, not at least when seen through the telescope, for then the points have disappeared. They have also felt a mysterious kinship to exist between them; but that is a very different matter. Dreamers the poets sometimes seem, and are frequently so styled; yet often enough they have proved far "surer guides to the searching spirit than men of science and mathe-

metics." Elizabeth Barrett Browning, not to mention her husband and many others, several times come near to saying the perfect word in this connection; but actually it was reserved for Francis Thompson:

I do think my tread  
Stirring the blossoms in the meadow-grass,  
Flickers the unwithering stars.

No mere pretty conceit is wrapped up in these lines. They hint the poet's sense of the omnipresence of Spirit, which was basic to his thought and is to all of a like mystical temper of mind. Not only are stars and flowers knit together in mysterious unity, but also with them the "star-indwelling spirit" of man. The Many are seen to be enmeshed in the One, each sharing in its degree in the Universal Life which "sleeps in inorganic matter, dreams in the vegetable, wakes in the animal and speaks in man." To this faith, or vision, not only is

Earth crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;

but humanity, far from being an aggregation of antagonistic individuals and groups, is an organic whole, a vast brotherhood, a

race of Man  
That receives life in parts to live in a whole  
And grow here according to God's clear plan.

## II

Many, however, have delighted to think that the Star of Bethlehem passed into the chancel of the church. Sometimes it is visibly represented there by a small lamp flickering in the dusky silence of the holy place. In not a few instances its light has not been allowed to go out for generations, in token of the fact that the Epiphany Star never sets. Not all Christian churches, even of the chancel type, have that lamp burning before the altar; but the Star is there, radiant though invisible, drawing the soul in reverent worship of God:

*Intra cuncta, nec inclusus,  
Extra cuncta, nec exclusus;*<sup>1</sup>

supremely revealed to mankind in Christ Jesus and graciously present to the heart of faith by the Holy Spirit. Under its gleaming light the whole story of Bethlehem and beyond is enacted every time celebrant and ministrant go forth from the altar, bread and wine in hand, to meet the communicant on the chancel steps, or in the nave of the church, as it were, half-way, even as God being manifested in the flesh comes thus in grace to meet mankind. And in the language of the ancient fathers, He became human

<sup>1</sup> In all things, yet not included in them; outside all things, yet not excluded from them.

that man might be made divine—language of tremendous signification, but always spoken with deep reverence and humility and with the mind on Christ. Thus the original Sacrament in the life of Jesus, Holy Communion and its symbolical acts, continually proclaim the possibility of the ultimate union of the soul with God, to which all are called in and through Christ.

It is, of course, true, as is sometimes said, and as St. John in the Prologue to his Gospel warrants one in saying, that every man and woman is already an incarnation of the Divine. But this, while real enough, is vague, rudimentary and inchoate. It may be likened to the tune which a great philosopher said kept singing at the back of his mind, but which he could never distinctly identify, nor ever get away from wholly. In some instances, indeed, those deep divine chords in the soul, even under other than Christian skies, have been woven into most winsome music. But who would have guessed what the perfect symphony of life was really like if the Great Musician Himself, for man's wonder and spiritual imitation, had not written it and rendered it in the marvellous tones of the personality and ministry of Christ.

Here is the finger of God . . .  
Ye have heard and seen:  
Consider and bow the head!

The spiritual splendor of that Life Divine unfolded on earth, as Dante conceived the souls of the redeemed in the great Mystic Rose in the Empyrean to unfold in the presence of the Sun of Everlasting Spring—"through obedience to the perfect law of love, which is the perfect law of eternal life." By this way the poet himself reached the fruition of faith and contemplation, and in that high hour knew, as others have, that the Love which rendered Christ resplendent among men, and made heaven all glorious, also moved the sun and all the other stars.

## III

It may well seem, sometimes, as if the gracious spirit of Christmas descended upon the world each midwinter and left it no better for all the happy thoughts and generous emotions which it elicits. But it is not so. In its coming and going, it is not unlike the alternating light and shade that play over the cornfields across the sea and constitute the charm of an Old Country summer. From time to time, maybe for long hours, the sun will hide its face behind the clouds, then glance through a rift and cast a measure of quickening splendor over the landscape. Those intermittent gleams that chase the gloom from the waving grain communicate a boon which is quietly assimilated when the filmy curtain falls back again; and each brilliant glimmer brings the golden harvest



nearer home. So it is with the recurring radiance of Christmas as it streams yearly across the green, unripe and immature life of the world. Not yet, indeed, are the plains white for the sickle; but the prospects of a joyous garnering of the sheaves of the Spirit are as bright as the promises of God.

Meanwhile prophetic fires burn on countless hearths and the Star of Bethlehem gleams from myriad windows. No more charming scene can be found on all this wide earth than in the typical Christian home behind closed doors on Christmas Eve. The warm rooms are bright with light and color and appropriately wreathed with the consecrated natural emblems. The tables are richly spread in regal mode. Provision abounds for wholesome fun and frolic; for the season gloriously proclaims that "the Lord pours not His grace into sad hearts." Beside the Yule log flickering on the hearth sit the aged, fondly dreaming of other days, or watching the children as they romp around, drawn ever to the mystic tree—their gate of heaven. Overarching all is the benign presence of a Father God, under which hearts melt into unison, share a larger life, taste a purer joy and know a diviner love; and all the more when they have been carried beyond the family circle by the injunction of the Master: "It is more blessed

to give than to receive.”<sup>2</sup> This is the sweet core of truth in the ancient legend of listening for the knock of the Christ Child on the door on Christmas Eve; for as the guardian, representative and friend of all in need, He wanders abroad, saying as of old: “In as much as ye do it unto one of the least of these, ye do it unto me.”<sup>3</sup> It is altogether a pleasing, even thrilling, picture to conjure up in the mind; for if—but what an if—all men and women everywhere felt toward all others as Christians do especially toward their own at this season of affectionate peace and goodwill, that would be the *at-one-ment* of the world for which the Son of God felt the bareness of Bethlehem and endured the cruel agony on the Cross.

<sup>2</sup> *Acts* xx, 35.

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